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THE IVORY GATE

BY

WALTER BESANT

AUTHOR OF 'ALL SORTS AND CONDITIONS OF MEN' ETC.



IN THREE VOLUMES

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THE IVORY GATE

CHAPTER XI

A MYSTERIOUS DISCOVERY

THE safe disposed of, there remained a cupboard, two tables full of drawers, twenty or thirty tin boxes. Checkley examined every one of these receptacles. In vain. There was not anywhere any trace of the certificates.

‘Yet,’ said Mr. Dering, ‘they must be somewhere. We have been hunting all the morning, and we have not found them. They are not in this room. Yet they must be somewhere. Certificates and such things don’t fly away. They are of no use to any one. People don’t steal certificates. I must have done something with them.’

‘Did you take them home with you?’

‘Why should I do that? I have no safe or strong-room at home.’

‘Did you send them to the Bank for greater safety? To be sure, they would be no more safe there than here.’

‘Go and ask. See the manager. Ask him if he holds any certificates of mine.’

The clerk turned to obey.

‘No.’ Mr. Dering stopped him. ‘What’s the good? If he held the things, there would have been dividends. Yet what can I do?’ For the first time in his life the lawyer felt the emotion that he had often observed in clients at times of real disaster. He felt as if there was nothing certain: not even Property: as if the law itself, actually the law—was of no use. His brain reeled: the ground was slipping under his feet, and he was falling forward through the table, and the floor and the foundation—forward and down—down—down. ‘What can I do?’ he repeated. ‘Checkley, go. See the manager. There

may be something to find out. I can't think properly. Go.'

When the clerk left him, he laid his head upon his hands and tried to put things quite clearly before himself. 'Where can the certificates be?' he asked himself, repeating this question twenty times. He was quite conscious that if he had been consulted on such a point by a client, he would have replied with the greatest readiness, suggesting the one really practical thing to do. For himself he could advise nothing. 'Where can the certificates be? Nobody steals corporation stock and gas companies' shares. They are no good if you do steal them. They can't be sold without the authority of the owner: he has got to sign transfer papers: if they were stolen, the dividends would go on being paid to the owner just the same. Besides'—— Somewhere about this point he bethought him of the Bank book. If the stock had been sold the money would appear to his credit. He snatched the book and looked at it. No;

there was no entry which could possibly represent the sale of stock. He knew what every entry meant, and when the amount was paid in : his memory was perfectly clear upon this point.

Checkley's suggestion occurred to him. Had he taken the certificates home with him? He might have done for some reason which he had now forgotten. Yes; that was the one possible explanation. He must have done. For a moment he breathed again—only for a moment, because he immediately reflected that he could not possibly do such a thing as take those securities to a house where he never transacted any business at all. Then he returned to his former bewilderment and terror. What had become of them? Why had he taken them out of the safe? Where had he bestowed them?

And why were there no dividends paid to him on these stocks? Why? He turned white with terror when he realised that if he got no more dividends, he could have no more stocks.

During a long professional career of fifty years, Mr. Dering had never made a mistake—at least he thought so. If he had not always invested his money to the greatest profit, he had invested it safely. He did not get the interest that some City men expect, but he made no losses. He looked upon himself, therefore, as a man of great sagacity, whereas in such matters he was only a man of great prudence. Also, during this long period he was always in the enjoyment of a considerable income. Therefore, he had never known the least anxiety about money. Yet all his life he had been counselling other people in their anxieties. It was exactly as if a specialist in some mortal disease should be himself attacked by it. Or it was as if the bo'sun, whose duty it is to superintend the flogging, should be himself tied up.

Nothing came to him: no glimmer of light: not the least recollection of anything. Then he thought desperately, that perhaps if he were to imagine how it would be if some-

body else, not himself at all, were to come to himself and lay the story before him as a solicitor, for advice. Or how it would be if he himself were to go to himself as a solicitor and put the case.

When Checkley came back, he found his master leaning back in his chair, his eyes wide open and staring at him as he opened the door—yet they saw nothing. Checkley stood under the gaze of those eyes, which saw him not. ‘Good Lord!’ he murmured. ‘Is the time come? Is he going to die?’

His face was white. He seemed to be listening anxiously: his lips were parted. ‘He’s in a fit of some kind,’ thought the old clerk.

He stood watching. He ought, perhaps, to have called for assistance. He did not think of it. He stood and watched, his face as pale as his master’s. Was it the end? If so—we all think of ourselves first—what about his berth and salary?

Suddenly his master’s eyes closed; he

dropped his head : he heaved a deep sigh : he moved his head and opened his eyes. He was restored to himself. The fit, whatever it was, had passed.

‘Checkley,’ he said, ‘I’ve been trying to put the thing to myself as if some other man—a client—was putting his case to me. I began very well. The other man came—that is, I myself called upon myself. I sat and heard my own story. I forgot, somehow, what the story was’—he shook his head impatiently. ‘Forget—forget—I always forget. But I remember that it wasn’t the story I wanted him to tell. It was another story altogether. He didn’t tell me what I wanted to know. That is—what has become of the certificates. I’m no nearer than I was. He made out that I was actually selling the certificates myself.’

‘You’re wandering a bit,’ said Checkley, anxiously watching him. ‘That’s all. You’ll be all right presently. You’ve bin shook up a bit, with the certificates and the notes and

all. If I were you I'd have a glass of something stiff.'

'No—no ; I shall come round presently. Yes—that's it. I'm a good deal upset by this business. Somehow, I don't seem able to think clearly about it. Let me see'—he sighed heavily—'I think you went somewhere—somewhere for me, before—before the other man came.'

'For Lord's sake, don't talk about the other man. There's no such person. Yes—I did go for you ; I went to ask the manager of the Bank whether he held any stock for you.'

'The manager of the Bank. True. Well, and does he hold anything ?'

'Not a scrap. Never had any.'

'Then, Checkley'—Mr. Dering dropped his hands helplessly—'what is to be done ?'

'I don't know, I'm sure,' the clerk replied with equal helplessness. 'I never heard of such a thing before in all my life. Thirty-eight thousand pounds ! It can't be. Nobody ever heard of such a thing before. Perhaps

they are about the place somewhere. Let's have another search.'

'No—no. It is useless. Why—I have had no dividends. The shares were all transferred, and nothing has been paid for them. The shares have been stolen. Checkley, I can't think. For the first time in my life, I can't think—I want some one to advise me. I must put the case in somebody's hands.'

'There's your young partner—a chance for him to show that he's worth his pay. Why don't you consult him, and then come back to the old plan of you and me? We're knocked a bit silly just at first; but the case will come to us in the long run. You would have a partner—nothing would do but a partner. The boy's in his own room now, I suppose, with a crown upon his head and the clerks kneelin' around—as grand as you please. Send for him.'

Mr. Dering nodded.

The partner, when he arrived a few

minutes later, found the Chief walking about the room in uncontrollable agitation. On the table lay piled the whole contents of the safe. In front of it stood the ancient clerk, trembling and shaking—head, hands, knees, and shoulders—following the movements of his master with eyes full of anxiety and terror. This strange fit, this forgetfulness, this rambling talk about another man, this new restlessness, frightened him.

‘You are come at last.’ Mr. Dering stopped and threw himself into his chair. ‘Now, my partner, hear the case and resolve the difficulty for us, if you can.—Tell him, Checkley—or—stay; no. I will tell it myself. Either I have lost my reason and my memory, or I have been robbed.’

George stood at the table and listened. Something of the utmost gravity had happened. Never before had he seen his Chief in the least degree shaken out of his accustomed frigidity of calm. Now he was excited; his eyes were restless; he talked

fast, he talked badly. He made half-a-dozen attempts to begin: he marshalled his facts in a slovenly and disorderly manner, quite unlike his usual clear arrangement: for fifty years he had been marshalling facts and drawing up cases, and at his own he broke down.

‘I think I understand the whole,’ said George, when his Chief paused and Checkley ceased to correct and to add. ‘You had certificates representing investments to the amount of 38,000*l.*: these are gone, unaccountably gone: no dividends have been paid for some months, and your broker speaks of large transfers.’

‘That’s not all,’ said Checkley. ‘Tell him about the notes.’

‘Yes. The fact may have some bearing upon the case. While we were looking for the certificates, and in order, I suppose, to complicate things and to bewilder me the more, we found in the safe the very notes—give me the bundle, Checkley—there they are—that were

paid over the Bank counter to the man who forged my name eight years ago.'

'What? The case in which Athelstan Arundel was accused?'

'The same. There they are—you hold them in your hand—the very notes! Strange! on the very day when I am threatened with another and a worse robbery! Yes—yes; the very notes!—the very notes! This is wonderful. Who put them there?'

'How can I know?'

'Well—but in any case one thing is certain. Athelstan's name is cleared at last. You will tell his mother that.'

'Not at all,' said Checkley. 'Why shouldn't he put 'em in himself? I saw him edging up towards the safe'——

'Saw him edging—stuff and nonsense! His name is cleared. This will be joyful news to his mother and sisters.'

'Austin, get me back my certificates,' said Mr. Dering; 'never mind those notes now. Never mind the joyful news. Never mind

Athelstan's name ; that can wait. The thought of him and the old forgery only bewilders my brain at this juncture. I cannot act. I cannot think. I feel as if I was blinded and stupefied. Act for me—think for me—work for me. Be my solicitor, George, as well as my partner.'

'I will do my best. It is difficult at first to understand—for what has happened? You cannot find—you have mislaid—certain papers. Certain dividends which were due do not appear to have been paid : and your brokers, Ellis and Northcote, have used a phrase in a letter which you do not understand. Would it not be well to get them here ; or shall I go into the City and ask them exactly what they meant and what has been done ?'

'If I could remember any transactions with them during the last six months. But I cannot, except a small purchase of Corporation stock last month—a few hundreds. And here are the papers belonging to that.'

‘Which of the partners do you deal with?’

‘The old man, Ellis—he’s always acted for me. He has been my friend for close on fifty years.’

‘Well, I will send for him, and tell him to come as soon as possible, and to bring along with him all the letters and papers he has.’

‘Good, good,’ said Mr. Dering, more cheerfully. ‘That is practical. I ought to have thought of that at the very outset. Now we shall get along. The first thing is to arrive at the facts—then we can act. If it was another man’s case, I should have known what to do. But when it is your own—and to lose the certificates, and when a sum of nearly forty thousand pounds is at stake—it looks like losing the money itself—and the feeling of uncertainty’——

‘All taken together, becomes rather overwhelming. Of course I should like to see the letter-book, and we must run through the

letters to see if they throw any light upon the business. Perhaps the papers themselves may be found among them.'

The presence of this young man, cheerful, decided, taking practical measures at once, cheered up the lawyer, and steadied his shattered nerves. But Checkley the clerk looked on gloomily. He replaced the papers in the safe, and stood beside it, as if to guard it; he followed the movements of the new partner with watchful, suspicious eyes; and he muttered sullenly between his teeth.

First George sent a telegram to the City for the broker. Then, while the old clerk still stood beside the safe, and Mr. Dering continued to show signs of agitation uncontrollable, sometimes walking about the room and sometimes sitting at his table, sometimes looking into the empty shelves of the safe, he began to look through the copied letters, those, that is, which had gone out of Mr. Dering's office. He searched for six months, working backwards.

‘Nothing for six months,’ he said.—
‘Checkley, give me the letters.’ He went through these. They were the letters received at the office, all filed, endorsed, and dated. There was not one during the letters of six months which he examined which had anything to do with the sales of stocks and shares.

‘If,’ he said, ‘you had written to Ellis and Northcote, a copy of your letter would be here in this book. If they had written to you, these letters would be among these bundles. Very well. Since no such letters are here, it is clear that no such letters were written. Therefore, no sales.’

‘Then,’ said Mr. Dering, ‘where are my certificates? Where are my dividends?’

‘That we shall see. At present, we are only getting at the facts.’

Then Mr. Ellis, senior partner of Ellis and Northcote, arrived, bearing a small packet of papers. Everybody knew Mr. Ellis, of Ellis and Northcote, one of the most respectable

stockbrokers in London—citizen and Loriner. He belongs eminently to the class called worthy : an old gentleman, carefully dressed, of smooth and polished appearance, pleasing manners, and great integrity. Nobody could look more truly *integer vitæ* than Mr. Ellis. Nor does his private practice belie his reputation and his appearance. His chin and lips looked as if they could not possibly endure the burden of beard or moustache ; his sentiments, one observed at a glance, would certainly be such as one expects from a citizen of his respectability.

‘ Here I am, dear sir,’ he said cheerfully — ‘ here I am, in immediate obedience to your summons. I hope that there is nothing wrong ; though your request that I would bring with me certain papers certainly made me a little apprehensive.’

‘ There is, I fear, a good deal wrong,’ said Mr. Dering. ‘ Sit down, my old friend.—Give Mr. Ellis a chair, Checkley.—Austin, you will tell him what he wants to know.’

‘You wrote to Mr. Dering yesterday recommending a certain investment’——

‘I certainly did. A very favourable opportunity it is, and a capital thing it will prove.’

‘You mentioned in your letter certain transfers and sales which, according to your letter, he had recently effected.’

‘Certainly.’

‘What sales were they?’

Mr. Ellis looked at his papers. ‘February last—sale of various stock, all duly enumerated here, to the value of 6,500*l.* March last, sale of various stock, also all duly enumerated, to the value of 12,000*l.* odd. April last, sale of stock to the value of 20,000*l.*—more or less—realising’——

‘You note the dates and amounts, Austin?’ said Mr. Dering.

‘Certainly; we will, however, get the dates and the amounts more exactly in a moment.—Now, Mr. Ellis, of course you received instructions with the papers them-

selves. Were they in writing or by word of mouth ?’

‘In writing. By letters written by Mr. Dering himself.’

‘Have you got these letters with you ?’

‘Everything is here, and in proper order.’ He laid his hand upon the papers. ‘Here, for instance, is the first letter, dated February 14, relating to these transactions.—You will no doubt remember it, Mr. Dering.’ He took up a letter, and read it aloud: “MY DEAR ELLIS—I enclose a bundle of certificates and shares. They amount to somewhere about 6,500*l.* at current price. Will you have these transferred to the name of Edmund Gray, gentleman, of 22 South Square, Gray’s Inn? Mr. Edmund Gray is a client, and I will have the amount paid to my account by him. Send me, therefore, the transfer papers and the account showing the amount due to me by him, together with your commission.—Very sincerely yours, EDWARD DERING.” That is the letter. The proceeding is not usual, yet

not irregular. If, for instance, we had been instructed to buy stock for Mr. Dering—— But of course you know.'

'Pardon me,' said George. 'I am not so much accustomed to buy stock as my partner. Will you go on?'

'We should have done so, and sent our client the bill for the amount with our commission. If we had been instructed to sell, we should have paid in to Mr. Dering's Bank the amount realised less our commission. A transfer is another kind of work. Mr. Dering transferred this stock to Edmund Gray, his client. It was therefore for him to settle with his client the charges for the transfer and the value of the stock. We therefore sent a bill for these charges. It was sent by hand, and a cheque was received by return of the messenger.'

George received the letter from him, examined it, and laid it before his partner.

Mr. Dering read the letter, held it to the

light, examined it very carefully, and then tossed it to Checkley.

‘If anybody knows my handwriting,’ he said, ‘it ought to be you. Whose writing is that?’

‘It looks like yours. But there is a trembling in the letters. It is not so firm as the most of your work. I should call it yours; but I see by your face that it is not.’

‘No; it is not my writing. I did not write that letter. This is the first I have heard of the contents of that letter.—Look at the signature, Checkley. Two dots are wanting after the word Dering, and the flourish after the last “n” is curtailed of half its usual dimensions. Did you ever know me to alter my signature by a single curve?’

‘Never,’ Checkley replied. ‘Two dots wanting and half a flourish.—Go on, sir; I’ve just thought of something. But go on.’

‘You don’t mean to say that this letter is

a forgery?' asked Mr. Ellis. 'Why—then——Oh! it is impossible. It must then be the beginning of a whole series of forgeries. It's quite impossible to credit it. The letter came from this office: the postmark shows it was posted in this district: the answer was sent here. The transfers—consider—the transfers were posted to this office. They came back duly signed and witnessed—from this office. I forwarded the certificate made out in the name of Edmund Gray—to this office: and I got an acknowledgment—from this office. I sent the account of the transaction with my commission charges—to this office, and got a cheque for the latter—from this office. How can such a complicated business as this—only the first of these transactions—be a forgery? Why, you want a dozen confederates at least for such a job as this.'

'I do not quite understand yet,' said George, inexperienced in the transfer of stocks and shares.

‘Well, I cannot sell stock without the owner’s authority; he must sign a transfer. But if I receive a commission from a lawyer to transfer his stock to a client, it is not my business to ask whether he receives the money or not.’

‘Yes—yes. And is there nothing to show for the sale of this 6,000*l.* worth of paper?’ George asked Mr. Dering.

‘Nothing at all. The letters and everything are a forgery.’

‘And you, Mr. Ellis, received a cheque for your commission?’

‘Certainly.’

‘Get me the old cheques and the cheque-book,’ said Mr. Dering. The cheque was drawn, as the letter was written, in Mr. Dering’s handwriting, but with the slight difference he had pointed out in the signature.

‘You are quite sure,’ asked George, ‘that you did not sign that cheque?’

‘I am perfectly certain that I did not.’

‘Then as for this Edmund Gray of 22 South Square, Gray’s Inn—what do you know about him?’

‘Nothing at all—absolutely nothing.’

‘I know something,’ said Checkley. ‘But go on—go on.’

‘He may be a non-existent person, for what you know.’

‘Certainly. I know nothing about any Edmund Gray.’

‘Wait a bit,’ murmured Checkley.

‘Well, but’—Mr. Ellis went on—‘this was only a beginning. In March you wrote to me again; that is to say I received a letter purporting to be from you. In this letter—here it is—you instructed me to transfer certain stock—the papers of which you enclosed—amounting to about 12,000*l.*—to Edmund Gray aforesaid. In the same way as before the transfer papers were sent to you for signature: in the same way as before they were signed and returned: and in the same way as before the commission was charged

to you and paid by you. It was exactly the same transaction as before—only for double the sum involved in the February business.’

Mr. Dering took the second letter and looked at it with a kind of patient resignation. ‘I know nothing about it,’ he said—‘nothing at all.’

‘There was a third and last transaction,’ said the broker. ‘This time in April. Here is the letter written by you with instructions exactly the same as in the previous cases, but dealing with the stock to the amount of 19,000*l.*, which we duly carried out, and for which we received your cheque—for commission.’

‘Every one of these letters—every signature of mine to transfer papers and to cheques—was a forgery,’ said Mr. Dering slowly. ‘I have no client named Edmund Gray: I know no one of the name: I never received any money from the transfers: these investments are stolen.’

‘Let me look at the letters again,’ said George. He examined them carefully, comparing them with each other. ‘They are so wonderfully forged that they would deceive the most careful. I should not hesitate, myself, to swear to the handwriting.’

It has already been explained that Mr. Dering’s handwriting was of a kind which is not uncommon with those who write a good deal. The unimportant words were conveyed by a curve, with or without a tail, while the really important words were clearly written. The signature, however, was large, distinct, and florid—the signature of the House, which had been flourishing for a hundred years and more, a signature which had never varied.

‘Look at it,’ said George again. ‘Who would not swear to this writing?’

‘I would for one,’ said Mr. Ellis. ‘And I have known it for forty years and more.—If that is not your own writing, Dering, it is the very finest imitation ever made.’

‘I don’t think my memory can be quite gone.—Checkley, have we ever had a client named Edmund Gray?’

‘No—never. But you’ve forgotten one thing. That forgery eight years ago—the cheque of 720*l.*—was payable to the order of Edmund Gray.’

‘Ah! So it was. This seems important.’

‘Most important,’ said George. ‘The forger could not possibly by accident choose the same name. This cannot be coincidence. Have you the forged cheque?’

‘I have always kept it,’ Mr. Dering replied, ‘on the chance of using it to prove the crime and convict the criminal. You will find it, Checkley, in the right-hand drawer of the safe. Thank you. Here it is. “Pay to the order of Edmund Gray;” and here is his endorsement. So we have his handwriting at any rate.’

George took it. ‘Strange,’ he said. ‘I should without any hesitation swear to your

handwriting here as well. And look—the signature to the cheque is exactly the same as that of these letters. The two dots missing after the name, and the flourish after the last “n” curtailed.’

It was so. The handwriting of the cheque and of the letters was the same : the signatures were slightly, but systematically, altered in exactly the same way in both letters and cheque.

‘This again,’ said George, ‘can hardly be coincidence. It seems to me that the man who wrote that cheque also wrote those letters.’

The endorsement was in a hand which might also be taken for Mr. Dering’s own. Nothing to be got out of the endorsement.

‘But about the transfer papers,’ said George. ‘They would have to be witnessed as well as signed.’

‘They were witnessed,’ said the broker, ‘by a clerk named Lorry.’

‘Yes, we have such a man in our office. —Checkley, send for Lorry.’

Lorry was a clerk employed in Mr. Dering’s outer office. Being interrogated, he said that he had no recollection of witnessing a signature for a transfer paper. He had witnessed many signatures, but was not informed what the papers were. Asked if he remembered especially witnessing any signature in February, March, or April, he replied that he could not remember any, but that he had witnessed a great many signatures: that sometimes Mr. Dering wanted him to witness his own signature, sometimes those of clients. If he were shown his signature he might remember. Lorry, therefore, was allowed to depart to his own place.

‘There can be no longer any doubt,’ said George, ‘that an attempt has been made at a robbery on a very large scale.’

‘An attempt only?’ Mr. Dering asked. ‘Where are my certificates?’

‘I say attempt, because you can’t really

steal stock. Dividends are only paid to those who lawfully possess it. This Edmund Gray we can find, if he exists. I take it, however, that he does not. It is probably a name assumed by the forger. And I suppose that he has made haste to sell his stock. Whether or no, you will certainly recover your property. People may as well steal a field as steal stocks and shares.'

'We can easily find out for you,' said Mr. Ellis, 'what has become of your paper.'

'If the thieves have kept it,' George went on, 'all they could make would be the dividends for five months. That, however, is only because the Bank book was not examined for so long. They could not reckon upon such an unusual stroke of luck. It seems almost certain that they must get rid of the stock as quickly as they could. Suppose that they have realised the whole amount. It is an immense sum of money. It would have to be paid by cheque into a bank: the holder

could only draw out the money gradually : he might, to be sure, go to America and have the whole amount transferred, but that would not help him much unless he could draw it out in small sums payable to confederates. In fact, the robbery seems to me hedged about with difficulties almost 'impossible.'

'It is the most extraordinary attempt at robbery that ever was,' said Mr. Ellis. 'Thirty-eight thousand pounds in shares. Well, I will find out for you if they have been sold and to whom. Meantime, my old friend, don't you be down-hearted about it. As Mr. Austin says, you will certainly get your property back again. What? We live in a civilised country. We cannot have large sums like 40,000*l.* stolen bodily. Property isn't kept any longer in bags of gold. Bank notes, banks, investments, all tend to make great robberies impossible. Courage ; you will get back your property.'

Mr. Dering shook his head doubtfully.

'There is another chance,' George sug-

gested. 'One has heard of robberies effected with the view of blackmail afterwards. Suppose we were to get a letter offering the whole to be returned for a certain sum.'

'No—no. It is now four months since the thing was done. They have sold out the stock and disappeared—gone to America, as you suggested. Why, the things may have been sold a dozen times over in the interval. That is the danger. Suppose they *have* been sold a dozen times over. Consider. Here is a share in the Great Western. I transfer it from A to B. Very good. The share now belongs to B, and stands in his name whether honestly come by or not. B sends it to another broker, who sells it to C. He, again, to D. Every transaction is right and in form except the first. You can trace the share from owner to owner. B has vanished. A says to C: "You bought that share of a thief." C says: "Very sorry. How was I to know? D has got it now." D says that it is his, and he will stick to it. We go to law

about the share. What is going to happen? Upon my word, I don't know. Well—but this is only conjecture. Let me first find out what has become of the shares. Of course there is a record, to which I have only to refer. I will let you know by to-morrow morning, if I can.'

When Mr. Ellis was gone, George began to sum up, for the clearing of his own mind, the ascertained facts of the case, so far as they had got.

'First,' he said, 'the letters to Ellis and Northcote were written on our headed paper. Clearly, therefore, the writer must have had access to the office. Next, he knew and could copy your handwriting. Third, he was able to intercept the delivery of letters, and to prevent your getting any he wished to stop, because the correspondence was conducted openly through the post. That seems to be a very important point. Fourth, the letters were all, apparently, in your handwriting, very skilfully imitated, instead of being dictated

and then signed. Fifth, he must at least have known of the last forgery, or how did he arrive at the name of Edmund Gray? And was it out of devilry and mockery, because that forgery escaped detection, that he used the name again? Sixth, he must have had access to the safe where the cheque-book (as well as the certificates) was kept. Seventh, he must have known the office pretty well, or how did he find out the names of your brokers? Eighth, the handwriting appeared to be exactly the same as that of the former forgery.'

'It is the same as last time,' said Checkley. 'That forgery was done in the office, if ever a thing was done here. Same with this—same with this. Well—time will show. Same with this.' He glared from under his great eyebrows at the young partner, as if he suspected that the young gentleman could throw some light upon that mystery if he wished.

We have given Time long enough to dis-

cover the author of the last business,' said Mr. Dering; 'but he has not chosen to do so as yet. The loss of property,' he groaned—'the loss of close on forty thousand pounds.'

'I don't believe it is lost,' said George. 'It can't be lost. It is a bit of a railway—part of a reservoir—a corner of the gas-works—you can't lose these things—unless, indeed, the difficulty suggested by Mr. Ellis occurs.'

Here Mr. Dering pushed back his chair and began again to walk about the room in restless agitation. He was no longer the grave and serious lawyer; he became one of his own clients, lamenting, as they had so often lamented in that room, the greatness of his misfortune. He uttered the actual commonplaces of men in distress—there is a dreadful sameness about the Lamentations of Ill Luck. We all know them—the hardness of the thing: the injustice of it: the impossibility of warding it off: his own sagacity in

taking every precaution: the dreadfulness of being singled out of a whole generation for exceptional misfortune. Mr. Dering himself, the grave, calm, reserved old lawyer, who seemed made of granite, broke down under the blow and became an ordinary human creature. In the lower walks, they weep. Checkley would have wept. Mr. Dering became eloquent, wrathful, sarcastic. No retired General who has ruined himself by gambling in stocks could so bemoan his luck. George listened, saying nothing. It was an experience. No man so strong but has his weak point. No man is completely armoured against the arrows of fate.

Presently he grew a little more calm, and sat down. 'Forgive me, George,' he said gently—'forgive this outbreak. There is more in the business than you know of. I feel as if I know something about it, but can't bring it out. I am growing so forgetful—I forget whole days—I am filled with the feeling that I ought to know about it. As

for the loss, what I have said is true. You do not yet feel as I do about Property. You are too young: you have not got any Property yet. Wait a few years—then you will be able to agree with me that there is nothing in the world so hard as to lose your Property—the Property that you have made—by your own exertions—for yourself.’

‘Now you talk like yourself,’ said Checkley. ‘That’s sense. Nothing so dreadful as to lose Property. It’s enough to kill people. It has killed many people.’

‘Property means everything. You understand that the more the older you get.’

‘You do,’ echoed Checkley. ‘There’s nothing in the world worth considering except Property.’

‘It means—remember—all the virtues—prudence — courage — quick sight — self-restraint—tenacity—all the fighting qualities. We do well to honour rich men. I hoped to receive honour myself as a rich man.

When you have put together a few thousands—by the exercise of these finer qualities, so that the thought of this gives you dignity'——

'Ah!' cried Checkley, straightening himself.

'To feel that they are gone—gone—gone—it is cruel.—George, you don't understand it. You are young: as yet you have no money.—Checkley, you have saved'——

'Me? Oh! A trifle, a trifle.' But he covered his mouth with his hand to conceal the smile of satisfaction.

'You are reputed rich.'

'No—no—no. Not rich. My chances have been few. I have not let them go. But rich? No—no.'

'How would you regard the loss—the robbery of your property—Checkley?'

The old clerk shook his head. He had no words adequate to the question.

'Apart from the loss,' Mr. Dering went on, 'there is the sense of insecurity. I felt it

once before when the other forgery took place. There seems no safety anywhere. Papers that I keep in my private safe, to which no one has a key but myself, which I never leave open if I leave the room even to go into another room, are taken. Cheque-books which I keep there are taken out and cheques stolen. Finally, things are put in—the bundle of notes—for instance. I say that I feel a sense of helplessness, as if everything might be taken from me and I should be powerless to resist.’

‘Let us first get back the certificates,’ said George, ‘and we will find out and defeat this gang, if it is a gang, of confederates. Yes,—it is as you say—the ground itself seems sinking beneath one’s feet—when one’s own investments are sold for nothing by a letter so like your own writing that it would deceive anybody.’

‘Done in the office,’ Checkley murmured—‘in the office. Same as last time. Well—we shall find him—we shall find him.’ He

began to bundle the papers back into the safe, murmuring : ‘ Same as last time—done in the office—we shall find him—we shall find him. We found him before, and we’ll find him now.’

CHAPTER XII

THE FIRST FIND

‘YES,’ said George thoughtfully, ‘a day or two ought to unravel this matter. We must first, however, before going to the Police, find out as much as we can ourselves. Let me take up the case by myself for a bit.’

‘No—no,’ Checkley grumbled. ‘Police first. Catch the man first.’

‘Put aside everything,’ said the Chief, ‘everything, George. Forget everything until you have found out the mystery of the conspiracy.’

‘It looks to me like a Long Firm,’ George went on—‘a Long Firm with a sham name and a respectable address. Of course there is no such person, really, as Edmund Gray.’

‘It is not only the loss—perhaps, let us hope’—Mr. Dering sighed—‘only a temporary loss ; if a real loss, then a most terrible blow—not only that, but it is the sense of insecurity. No one ever found out about that cheque—and here are the notes in the safe all the time.’

‘He put ’em in,’ said Checkley.

‘This is the second time—and the same name still—Edmund Gray. It fills me with uneasiness—I am terrified, George. I know not what may be the next blow—what may be taken from me—my mortgages—my houses—my land—everything. Go. I can do the work of the office—all the work—by myself. But this work I cannot do. I am not able to think about it. These thoughts overpower me and cloud my reason.’

‘Well,’ said George, ‘I will do what I can. I don’t suppose there is any Edmund Gray at all : but one must try to find out. There can be no harm in paying a visit to Gray’s Inn. If the thing had been done yesterday, it would be necessary to strike at once with a warrant

for the arrest of the said Edmund Gray. As it is four months since the last robbery, there can be small harm in the delay of a day or two. I will go and inquire a little.'

Nothing easier than to inquire. There was the man's address: everybody knows Gray's Inn: everybody knows South Square. The place is only ten minutes' walk from Lincoln's Inn. George took his hat, walked over and proceeded straight to No. 22, expecting to find no such name on the door-posts. On the contrary, there it was. '2nd Floor, Mr. Edmund Gray,' among the other occupants of the staircase. He mounted the stairs. On the second floor right was the name over the door, 'Mr. Edmund Gray.' But the outer door was closed. That is a sign that the tenant of the Chambers is either not at home or not visible. On the first floor were the offices of a Firm of Solicitors. He sent in his card. The name of Dering and Son commands the respectful attention of every solicitor in London. One of the partners received him.

The firm of Dering and Son was anxious to see Mr. Edmund Gray, who had the Chambers overhead. At what hours was Mr. Edmund Gray generally in his rooms? Nobody knew, not either of the partners, not any of the clerks. He might have been met going up and down the stairs, but nobody knew him by sight or anything about him. This at first sight seemed suspicious; afterwards George reflected that men may live for years on the same staircase and never know anything about each other. Men who live in Gray's Inn do not visit each other: there is little neighbourly spirit among men in Chambers, but rather an unspoken distrust.

‘But,’ said the partner, ‘I can tell you who is his landlord. He does not take the rooms of the Inn direct, but as we do, from one who has several sets on a long lease, and sublets the rooms. They may know something about the man at the Steward's office across the Square. If not, the landlord will certainly know.’

George asked if Edmund Gray was newly arrived. No. It appeared that he had been in the Inn for a long time. 'But then,' his informant added, 'he may have been here a hundred years for all we know: we never think of our neighbours in Chambers. Opposite is a man whose name has been over the door as long as I can remember anything. I don't know who he is or what is his business. I don't even know him by sight. So with Mr. Edmund Gray. If I were to meet him on the stairs, I should not be any the wiser. You see, I am only here in the daytime. Now, the other man on the second floor I do know something about, because he is a coach and was a Fellow of my College. And the man in the garrets I hear about occasionally, because he is an old barrister who sometimes defends a prisoner.'

At the Steward's office George put the same question. 'I am a solicitor,' he said. 'Here is my card. I am most anxious to see Mr. Edmund Gray, of No. 22. Could you

save me time by letting me know at what hour he is in his Chambers? ’

They could tell him nothing. Mr. Gray was not a tenant of the Inn. Very likely he was a residential tenant who came home in the evenings after business.

Everything learned is a step gained. Whether Edmund Gray was a man or a Long Firm, the name had been on the door for many years. But—many years?—could a confederacy of swindlers go on for many years, especially if they undertook such mighty schemes for plunder as this business?

Next he went to the address of the landlord. He was a house agent in Bloomsbury, and apparently a person of respectability.

‘If you could tell me,’ George began with the same question, ‘at what hours I could find your tenant in his Chambers; or if you could give me his business address, we should be very greatly obliged. We want to find him at once—to-day, if possible, on very important business.’

‘Well, I am sorry, very sorry—but—in fact, I don’t know anything about my tenant’s hours, nor can I give you his place of business. I believe he has no business.’

‘Oh! But you took him as a tenant. You must have had some references.’

‘Certainly. And upon that I can satisfy you very shortly.’ He opened a great book and turned over the pages. ‘Here it is—to No. 22, South Square, Gray’s Inn, Second floor, north side—Edmund Gray, gentleman. Rent 40*l.* a year. Date of taking the rooms, February, 1882, at the half-quarter. Reference, Messrs. Dering and Son, Solicitors, New Square, Lincoln’s Inn.’

‘Why—you mean that he referred to us—to Messrs. Dering and Son—in the year 1882!’

‘That is so. Would you like to see the letter which we received on application? Wait a moment.’ He rang the bell, and a clerk appeared, to whom he gave instructions. ‘I am bound to say,’ the landlord went on,

‘that a more satisfactory tenant than Mr. Gray does not exist. He pays his rent regularly by Post-office order every quarter on the day before quarter day.’

‘Oh! I wonder’—— But he stopped, because to begin wondering is always futile, especially at so early a stage. When there are already accumulated facts to go upon, and not till then, wondering becomes the putting together of the puzzle.

‘Well, here is the letter. “Gentlemen”’—the house agent read the letter received on application to the reference—‘“In reply to your letter of the 13th, we beg to inform you that Mr. Edmund Gray is a client of ours, a gentleman of independent means, and that he is quite able to pay any reasonable rent for residence or Chambers.—Your obedient servants, DERING AND SON.”—I suppose,’ he added, ‘that a man doesn’t want a better reference than your own?’

‘No; certainly not.’ George looked at the letter. It presented as to handwriting

exactly the same points of likeness and of difference as all the other letters in this strange case : the body of the letter apparently written in the hand of Mr. Dering ; that is, so as to deceive everybody : the signature, with one or two small omissions. ‘Certainly not,’ he repeated. ‘With such a reference, of course, you did not hesitate. Did you ever see Mr. Gray?’

‘Certainly. I have seen him often. First when he was getting his rooms furnished, and afterwards on various occasions.’

‘What kind of a man is he to look at?’

‘Elderly. Not exactly the kind of man you’d expect to have Chambers. Mostly, they’re young ones who like the freedom. An elderly gentleman : pleasant in his manners : smiling and affable : gray-haired.’

‘Oh!’ Then there was a real Edmund Gray of ten years’ standing in the Inn, who lived or had Chambers at the number stated in the forged letters.

‘I suppose,’ said the house agent, ‘that

my respectable tenant has not done anything bad.'

'N-no—not to my knowledge. His name occurs in rather a disagreeable case. Would you be so very kind as to let him know, in case you should meet him—but of course we shall write to him—that we are most anxious to see him?'

This the landlord readily promised. 'There is another person,' he said, 'who can tell you a great deal more than anybody else. That is his laundress. I don't know who looks after him, but you can find out at the Inn. The policeman will know. Go and ask him.'

In the game of battledore and shuttlecock, the latter has no chance except to take the thing coolly, without temper. George was the shuttlecock. He was hit back into Gray's Inn—this time into the arms of the policeman.

'Well, sir,' said the guardian of the peace, 'I do not know anything about the gentleman

myself. If he was one of the noisy ones, I should know him. But he isn't, and therefore I have never heard of him. But if he lives at No. 22, I can tell you who does his rooms; and it's old Mrs. Cripps, and she lives in Leather Lane.'

This street, which is now, comparatively speaking, purged and cleansed, is not yet quite the ideal spot for one who would have pure air and cleanliness combined with godliness of conversation. However, individual liberty is nowhere more absolutely free and uncontrolled than in Leather Lane.

Mrs. Cripps lived on the top floor, nearest to Heaven, of which she ought to be thinking because she was now old and near her end. She was so old that she was quite past her work, and only kept on Mr. Gray's rooms because he never slept there, and they gave her no trouble except to go to them in the morning with a duster and to drop asleep for an hour or so. What her one gentleman gave her, moreover, was all she had to live upon.

Though the morning was warm, she was sitting over the fire watching a small pan, in which she was stewing a savoury mess, consisting of a 'block ornament' with onions, carrots, and turnips. Perhaps she was thinking—the poor old soul—of the days gone by—gone by for fifty years—when she was young and wore a feather in her hat. Old ladies of her class do not think much about vanished beauty, but they think a good deal about vanished feathers and vanished hats: they remember the old free carriage in the streets with the young friends and the careless laugh and the ready jest. It is the ancient gentlewoman who remembers the vanished beauty, and thinks of what she was fifty years ago.

Mrs. Cripps heard a step on the narrow stair leading to her room—a manly step. It mounted higher and more slowly, because the stairs were dark as well as narrow. Then the visitor's hat knocked against the door. He opened it, and stood there looking in. A gentleman! Not a District Visitor or a Sister

trying to persuade her to early Church—nor yet the clergyman—a young gentleman.

‘You are Mrs. Cripps?’ he asked. ‘The policeman at Gray’s Inn directed me here. You are laundress, I believe, to Mr. Edmund Gray of No. 22?’

‘Suppose I am, sir,’ she replied suspiciously. A laundress is like the Hall Porter of a Club: you must not ask her about any of her gentlemen.

‘I have called to see Mr. Edmund Gray on very important business. I found his door shut. Will you kindly tell me at what hours he is generally in his Chambers?’

She shook her head: but she held out her hand.

The young gentleman placed half a sovereign in her palm. Her fingers closed over the coin. She clutched it, and she hid it away in some secret fold of her ragged dress. There is no woman so ragged, so dropping to pieces with shreds and streamers and tatters, but she can find a safe hiding-place, somewhere

in her rags, for a coin or for anything else that is small or precious.

‘I never tell tales about my gentlemen,’ she said, ‘especially when they are young and handsome, like you. A pore laundress has eyes and ears and hands, but she hasn’t got a tongue. If she had, there might be terrible, terrible trouble. Oh! dear—yes. But Mr. Gray isn’t a young gentleman. He’s old, and it isn’t the same thing.’

‘Then,’ said George, ‘how and when can I find him?’

‘I was coming to that. You can’t find him. Sometimes he comes, and sometimes he doesn’t come.’

‘Oh! He doesn’t live in the rooms, then?’

‘No. He doesn’t live in the rooms. He uses the rooms sometimes.’

‘What does he use them for?’

‘How should I know? All the gentlemen do things with pens and paper. How should I know what they do? They make their money with their pens and paper. I dun

know how they do it. I suppose Mr. Gray is making his money like the rest of them.'

'Oh! he goes to the Chambers and writes?'

'Sometimes it's weeks and weeks and months and months before he comes at all. But always my money regular and beforehand sent in an envelope and a postal order.'

'Well, what is his private address? I suppose he lives in the country?'

'I don't know where he lives. I know nothing about him. I go there every morning and I do the room. That's all I know.'

There was no more information to be obtained. Sometimes he came to the Inn; sometimes he stayed away for weeks and weeks, and for months and months.

'I might ha' told you more, young gentleman,' murmured the old woman, 'and I might ha' told you less. P'raps you'll come again.'

He went back to Lincoln's Inn, and set down his facts.

First, there was a forgery in the year 1882,

in which the name of Edmund Gray was used. Next, in the series of forgeries just discovered, not only was the name of Edmund Gray used throughout, but the handwriting of the letters and cheques was exactly the same as that of the first cheque, with the same peculiarities in the signature. This could hardly be a coincidence. The same man must have written the whole.

Then, who was Edmund Gray?

He was a real personage—a living man—not a Firm—one known to the landlord of the Chambers, and to the laundress, if to nobody else. He did not live in the Chambers, but he used them for some business purposes; he sometimes called there and wrote. What did he write? Where was he, and what was he doing, when he was not at the Chambers? He might be one—leader or follower—of some secret gang. One has read of such gangs, especially in French novels, where the leaders are noble Dukes of the first rank, and Princesses—young, lovely, of the highest

fashion. Why should there not be such a gang in London? Clever conspirators could go a very long way before they were even suspected. In this civilisation of cheques and registered shares and official transfers, property is so much defended that it is difficult to break through the armour. But there must be weak places in that armour. It must be possible for the wit of man to devise some plan by means of which property can be attacked successfully. Had he struck such a conspiracy?

Thus. A man calling himself Edmund Gray gets a lease of Chambers by means of a forged letter in answer to a reference. It is convenient for certain conspirators, hereinafter called the company, to have an address, though it may never be used. The conspiracy begins by forging a cheque to his order for 720*l*. That was at the outset, when the conspirators were young. It was found dangerous, and the notes were therefore replaced in the safe. Note, that the company, through

one or other of its members, has access to that safe. This might perhaps be by means of a key—in the evening, after office hours: or by some one who was about the place all day.

Very good. The continued connection of some member of the Firm with Dering and Son is proved by the subsequent proceedings. After eight years, the company having matured their machinery, and perhaps worked out with success other enterprises, return to their first quarry, where they have the advantage of access to the letters and can look over their disposition. They are thus enabled to conduct their successive *coups*, each bigger than the one before. And for four months the thing remains undiscovered. Having the certificates in their hands, what was to prevent them from selling the whole and dividing the proceeds? Nothing. Yet, in such a case they would disappear, and here was Edmund Gray still fearlessly at large. Why had he not got clear away long before?

Again—all the correspondence concerning

Edmund Gray was carried on between the office and the brokers. There were no letters from Edmund Gray at all. Suppose it should be found impossible to connect Edmund Gray with the transactions carried on in his name. Suppose the real Edmund Gray were to deny any knowledge at all of the transactions. Suppose he were to say that ten years before he had brought a letter of introduction to Mr. Dering, and knew nothing more about him. Well—but the certificates themselves—what about them? Their possession would have to be accounted for. So he turned the matter over and over and arrived at nothing, not even the next step to take.

He went back to the Chief and reported what he had discovered: the existence of an Edmund Gray—the letter of recommendation to the landlord. ‘Another forgery,’ groaned Mr. Dering.

‘It is done in the office,’ said George. ‘It is all done in the office—letters—cheques—everything.’

‘The office,’ Checkley repeated. ‘No doubt about it.’

‘Give up everything else, George,’ said Mr. Dering eagerly—‘everything else. Find out—find out. Employ detectives. Spend money as much as you please. I am on a volcano—I know not what may be taken from me next. Only find out, my partner, my dear partner—find out.’

When George was gone, Checkley went after him and opened the door mysteriously, to assure himself that no one was listening.

‘What are you going on like that for, Checkley?’ asked his master irritably. ‘Is it another forgery? It rains forgeries.’

‘No—no. Look here. Don’t trouble too much about it. Don’t try to think how it was done. Don’t talk about the other man. Look here. You’ve sent that young gentleman to find out this business. Well—mark my words: he won’t. He won’t, I say. He’ll make a splash, but he won’t find anything. Who found out the last job?’

‘ You said you did. But nothing was proved.’

‘ I found that out. Plenty of proof there was. Look here ’—his small eyes twinkled under his shaggy eyebrows—‘ I’ll find out this job as well, see if I don’t. Why ’—— He rubbed his hands. ‘ Ho ! ho ! I *have found out*. Don’t ask me—don’t put a single question. But—I’ve got ’em—oh ! I’ve got ’em. I’ve got ’em for you—as they say—on toast.’

CHAPTER XIII

THINGS MORE REMARKABLE

AFTER such a prodigious event as the discovery of these unparalleled forgeries, anything might happen without being regarded. People's minds are open at such times to see, hear, and accept everything. After the earthquake, ghosts walk, solid things fly away of their own accord, good men commit murder, rich men go empty away, and nobody is in the least surprised.

See what happened, the very next day, at the office in New Square. When George arrived in the morning he found that the senior Partner had not yet appeared. He was late. For the first time for fifty years and

more, he was late. He went to his place, and the empty chair gave an air of bereavement to the room. Checkley was laying out the table ; that is, he had done so a quarter of an hour before, but he could not leave off doing it : he was loth to leave the table before the master came : he took up the blotting pad and laid it down again : he arranged the pens : he lingered over the job.

‘Not come yet?’ George cried, astonished. ‘Do you think that yesterday’s shock has been too much for him?’

‘I believe it’s killed him,’ said the old clerk—‘killed him. That’s what it has done ;’ and he went on muttering and mumbling. ‘Don’t,’ he cried, when George took up the letters. ‘P’r’aps he isn’t dead yet—you haven’t stepped into his shoes just yet. Let them letters alone.’

‘Not dead yet. I hope not.’ George began to open the letters, regardless of the surly and disrespectful words. One may forgive a good deal to fidelity. ‘He will go

on for a good many years after we have got the money back for him.'

'After some of us'—Checkley corrected him—'have got his money back for him.' He turned to go back to his own office, then turned again and came back to the table. He laid both hands upon it, leaned forward, shaking his head, and said with trembling voice: 'Did you never think, Mr. Austin, of the black ingratitude of the thing? Him that done it you know—him that eat his bread and took his money.' When Checkley was greatly moved, his grammar went back to the early days before he was confidential clerk.

'I daresay it was ungrateful. I have been thinking, hitherto, of stronger adjectives.'

'Well—we've agreed—all of us—haven't we?—that it was done in this office—some one in the office done it with the help of some one out: some one who knows his ways'—he pointed to the empty chair—'some one who'd known all his ways for a long time, ten years at least.'

‘ Things certainly seem to point that way ’
—‘ and they point to you,’ he would have added, but refrained.

The old man shook his head again and went on. ‘ They’ve eaten his bread and done his work ; and—and—don’t you call it, Mr. Austin—I ask you plain—don’t you call it black ingratitude ? ’

‘ I am sure it is. I have no doubt whatever about the ingratitude. But, you see, Checkley, that vice is not one which the Courts recognise. It is not one denounced in the Decalogue.—There is a good deal to consider, in fact, before we get to the ingratitude. It is probably a criminal conspiracy ; it is a felony ; it is a thing to be punished by a long term of penal servitude. When we have worried through all this and got our conspirators under lock and key, we will proceed to consider their ingratitude. There is also the bad form of it and the absence of proper feeling of it ; and the want of consideration of the trouble they give. Patience !

We shall have to consider the business from your point of view presently.'

'I wouldn't scoff and snigger at it, Mr. Austin, if I were you. Scoffin' and sniggin' might bring bad luck. Because, you know, there's others besides yourself determined to bring this thing to a right issue.'

George put down his papers and looked at this importunate person. What did he mean? The old man shrunk and shrivelled and grew small. He trembled all over. But he remained standing with his hands on the table—leaning forward. 'Eight years ago,' he went on, 'when that other business happened—when Mr. Arundel cut his lucky'——

'I will have nothing said against Mr. Arundel. Go to your own room.'

'One word—I will speak it. If *he's* dead I shall not stay long here. But I shall stay so long as he's alive, though you are his partner. Only one word, sir. If Mr. Arundel hadn't—run away—he'd 'a been a partner instead of you.'

‘Well?’

‘Well, sir—s’pose he’d been found out *after* he was made a partner, instead of before?’

George pointed to the door. The old man seemed off his head—was it with terror? Checkley obeyed. But at the door he turned his head and grinned. Quite a theatrical grin. It expressed malignity and the pleasure of anticipation. What was the matter with the old man? Surely, terror. Who, in the office, except himself, had the control of the letters? Who drew that quarterly cheque? Surely, terror.

It was not until half-past eleven that Mr. Dering arrived at the office. He usually passed through the clerk’s office outside his own; this morning he entered by his own private door, which opened on the stairs. No one had the key except himself. He generally proceeded in an orderly and methodical manner to hang up his hat and coat, take off his gloves, place his umbrella

in the stand, throw open the safe, sit down in his chair, adjusted at a certain distance of three inches or so, to put on his glasses, and then, without either haste or dawdling, to begin the work of the day. It is very certain that to approach work always in exactly the same way saves the nerves. The unmethodical workman gets to his office at a varying hour, travels by different routes—now on an omnibus, now on foot; does nothing to-day in the same way that he did it yesterday. He breaks up early. At sixty he talks of retiring, at seventy he is past his work.

This morning, Mr. Dering did nothing in its proper order. First, he was nearly two hours late. Next, he came in by his private door. George rose to greet him, but stopped because—a most wonderful thing—his Partner made as if he did not observe his presence. His eyes went through George in creepy and ghostly fashion. The junior partner stood still, silent, in bewilderment. Saw one ever the like, that a man should at noontide walk in

his sleep ! His appearance, too, was strange ; his hat, pushed a little back, gave a touch of recklessness—actually recklessness—to the austere old lawyer : his eyes glowed pleasantly ; and on his face—that grave and sober face—there was a pleased and satisfied smile : he looked happy, interested, benevolent, but not—no—not Mr. Edward Dering. Again, his coat, always tightly buttoned, was now hanging loose ; outside, it had been swinging in the breeze, to the wonder of Lincoln's Inn : and he wore no gloves, a thing most remarkable. He looked about the room, nodded his head, and shut the door behind him.

‘He’s somnambulating,’ George murmured, ‘or else I am invisible : I must have eaten fern-seed without knowing it.’

Mr. Dering, still smiling pleasantly, walked across the room to the safe and unlocked it. He had in his hand a brown-paper parcel tied with red tape—this he deposited in the safe, locked it up, and dropped the keys in his pocket. The window beside the safe was

open. He sat down, looking out into the Square.

At this moment Checkley opened the door softly, after his wont, to bring in more letters. He stopped short, seeing his master thus seated, head in hand, at the window. He recognised the symptoms of yesterday—the rapt look, the open eyes that saw nothing. He crept on tiptoe across the room. ‘Hush!’ he whispered. ‘Don’t move. Don’t speak. He went like this yesterday. Don’t make the least noise. He’ll come round presently.’

‘What is it?’

‘Kind of fit, it is. Trouble done it. Yah! Ingratitood.’ He would have hissed the word, but it has no sibilant. You can’t hiss without the materials. ‘Yesterday’s trouble. That’s what’s done it.’

They stood watching in silence for about ten minutes. The office was like the Court of the sleeping Princess. Then Checkley sneezed. Mr. Dering probably mistook the sneeze for a kiss, for he closed his eyes for a moment,

opened them again, and arose once more himself, grave and austere.

He nodded cheerfully, took off his hat, hung it on its peg, buttoned his coat, and threw open the safe. Evidently he remembered nothing of what had just passed.

‘You are early, George,’ he said. ‘You are before me, which is unusual. However—the early bird—we know.’

‘Before you for once. Are you quite well this morning? None the worse for yesterday’s trouble?’

‘He’s always well,’ said Checkley, with cheerfulness assumed. ‘Nobody ever sees him ill—he get ill? Not him. Eats as hearty as five-and-twenty and walks as upright.’

‘I am perfectly well, to the best of my knowledge. Yesterday’s business upset me for the time—but it did not keep me awake. Yet it is certainly a very great trouble. You have no news, I suppose, that brought you here earlier than usual?’

‘Nothing new since yesterday.’

‘And you feel pretty confident?’

‘I feel like a sleuth-hound. I understand the pleasures of the chase. I long to be on the scent again. As for Edmund Gray, he is as good as in prison already.’

‘Good. I was for the moment shaken out of myself. I was bewildered. I was unable to look at the facts of the case calmly. For the first time in my life I wanted advice. Well: I now understand what a great thing it is that our profession exists for the assistance of men in trouble. How would the world get along at all without solicitors?’

He took his usual place at the table and turned over his letters. ‘This morning,’ he went on, ‘I feel more assured: my mind is clear again. I can talk about the case. Now then. Let us see—Edmund Gray is no shadow, but a man. He has made me recommend him to his landlord. He is a clever man and a bold man. Don’t be in a hurry about putting your hands upon him. Complete your case before you strike. But make no delay.’

‘There shall be none. And you shall hear everything from day to day, or from hour to hour.’

Left alone, Mr. Dering returned to his papers and his work.

At half-past one, Checkley looked in. ‘Not going to take lunch this morning?’

‘Lunch? I have only just’—— Mr. Dering looked at his watch. ‘Bless me! Most extraordinary! This morning has slipped away. I thought I had only just sat down. It seems not more than half an hour since Mr. Austin left me. Why, I should have forgotten all about it and let the time go by—nothing worse for a man of my years than irregular feeding.’

‘It’s lucky you’ve got me,’ said his clerk. ‘Half-a-dozen partners wouldn’t look after your meal-times.—Ah!’ as his master went upstairs to the room where he always had his luncheon laid out, ‘he’s clean forgotten. Some of these days, walking about wropped up in his thoughts, he’ll be run over.—Clean

forgotten it, he has. Sits down in a dream : walks about in a dream : some of these days he'll do something in a dream. Then there will be trouble.' He closed the door and returned to his own desk, where he was alone, the juniors having gone out to dinner. His own dinner was in his coat pocket. It consisted of a saveloy cut in thin slices and laid in bread with butter and mustard—a tasty meal. He slowly devoured the whole to the last crumb. Then, Mr. Dering having by this time finished his lunch and descended again, Checkley went up-stairs and finished the pint of claret, of which his master had taken one glass. 'It's sour stuff,' he said. 'It don't behave as wine in a man's inside ought to behave. It don't make him a bit joyfuller. But it's pleasant too. Why they can't drink Port wine—which is real wine—when they can afford it, I don't know.'

It was past three in the afternoon when George returned, not quite so confident in his bearing, yet full of news.

‘If you are quite ready to listen,’ he said, ‘I’ve got a good deal to tell. First of all, I thought I would have another shot at Gray’s Inn. I went to the Chambers. The outer door was open, which looked as if the man was at home. I knocked at the inner door, which was opened by the laundress, the old woman whom I saw yesterday. “Well, sir,” she said, “you are unlucky. The master has been here this very morning. And he hasn’t been long gone. You’ve only missed him by half an hour or so.” I asked her if he would return that day; but she knew nothing. Then I asked her if she would let me write and leave a note for him. To this she consented, rather unwillingly. I went in, therefore, and wrote my note at Mr. Gray’s table. I asked him to call here on important business, and I marked the note “Urgent.” I think there can be no harm in that. Then I looked about the room. It is one of those old wainscoted rooms, furnished simply, but everything solid and good—a long table, nearly as large

as this one of yours : solid chairs—a solid sofa. Three or four pictures on the wall, and a bookcase full of books. No signs of occupation : no letters : no flowers. Everything covered with dust, although the old woman was there. I could have wished to examine the papers on the table, but the presence of the old woman forbade that dishonourable act. I did, however, look at the books. And I made a most curious discovery. Mr. Edmund Gray is a Socialist. All his books are on Socialism : they are in French, German, and English : all books of Socialism. And the pictures on the wall are portraits of distinguished Socialists. Isn't that wonderful? Did one ever hear before of Socialism and forgery going together?'

'Not too fast. We haven't yet connected Edmund Gray with the forgery. At present, we only know that his name was used.'

'Wait a bit. I am coming to that. After leaving the chambers, I went into the City

and saw Mr. Ellis. First of all, none of the stock has been sold.'

'Oh! they have had three months, and they have not disposed of it? They must have met with unforeseen difficulties. Let me see.'

Mr. Dering was now thoroughly alert. The weakness of the morning had completely passed away. 'What difficulties? Upon my word, I cannot understand that there could have been any. They have got the papers from a respectable solicitor through a respectable broker. No—no. Their course was perfectly plain. But rogues often break down through their inability to see the strength of their own case.'

'Next, Mr. Ellis has ascertained that some of the dividends are received by your Bank. I therefore called on the manager. Now, be prepared for another surprise.'

'Another forgery?'

'Yes—another forgery. It is nine or ten years since you sent a letter to the manager

—I saw it—introducing your client Edmund Gray, gentleman, who was desirous of opening a private account. He paid in a small sum of money, which has been lying to his credit ever since, and has not been touched. In February last he received another letter from you ; and again in March and April, forwarding certificates, and requesting him to receive the dividends. With your own hand you placed the papers in the Bank. I saw the letters. I would swear to your handwriting.’

‘These people are as clever as they are audacious.’

‘At every point a letter from you—a letter which the ablest expert would tell was your handwriting. Your name covers and vouches for everything.’

‘Did you tell the manager what has happened?’

‘Certainly ; I told him everything. And this is in substance the line he takes. “Your Partner,” he says, “alleges that those papers have been procured by forgery. He says that

the letter of introduction is a forgery. Very good. It may be so. But I have opened this account for a customer who brought me an introduction from the best solicitor in London, whose handwriting I know well, and recognise in the letter. Such an allegation would not be enough in itself for me to take action: until a civil or criminal action is brought—until it is concluded—I could not refuse to treat the customer like all the rest. At the same time I will take what steps I can to inquire into my customer's antecedents.”

‘Quite right,’ said Mr. Dering.

‘I asked him next, what he would do if the customer sent for the papers. He said that if an action were brought, he would probably be served with a *sub pœna duces tecum*, making him keep and produce these papers as forming part of the documents in the case.’

‘Certainly, certainly; the manager knows his law.’

“And,” he went on, “as regards cheques,

I shall pay them or receive them until restrained.”’

‘In other words, he said what we expected. For our own action now.’

‘We might apply to a judge in Chambers for an attachment or a garnishee order. That must be *pendente lite*, an interlocutory proceeding, in the action. As yet, we have not brought an action at all. My partner’—Mr. Dering rubbed his hands cheerfully—‘I think we have done very well so far. These are clumsy scoundrels, after all. They thought to divert suspicion by using my name. They thought to cover themselves with my name. But they should have sold and realised without the least delay. Very good. We have now got our hands upon the papers. It would have complicated matters horribly had the stock been sold and transferred. So far we are safe. Because, you see, after what they have heard, the Bank would certainly not give them up without letting us know. They would warn us: they would put the man off:

they would ask him awkward questions about himself. Oh ! I think we are safe—quite safe.’

Mr. Dering drew a long breath. ‘I was thinking last night,’ he continued, ‘of the trouble we might have if those certificates had changed hands. They might have been bought and sold a dozen times in four months : they might have been sold in separate small lots, and an order of the Court necessary for every transaction. We have now nothing but the simple question before us : how did the man Edmund Gray get possession of this property ?’

He sat in silence for a few minutes. Then he went on quietly. ‘To lose this money would be a heavy blow for me—not all my fortune, nor a quarter, but a large sum. I have plenty left. I have no hungry and expectant heirs : my people are all wealthy. But yet a very heavy loss. And then—to be robbed. I have always wondered why we left off hanging robbers. They ought to be

hanged, every one. He who invades the sacred right of property should be killed—killed without hope of mercy.’ He spoke with the earnestness of sincerity. ‘To lose this property would not be ruin to me; yet it would be terrible. It would take so many years out of my past life. Every year means so much money saved. Forty thousand pounds means ten years of my past—not taken away so that I should be ten years younger, but, ten years of work annihilated. Could I forgive the man who would so injure me? Never.’

‘I understand,’ said George. ‘Fortunately, we shall get the papers back. The fact of their possession must connect the possessor with the fraud. Who is he? Can he be warned already? Yet who should tell him? Who knows that we have discovered the business? You—your friend Mr. Ellis—the manager of the Bank—no one else. Yes—there is also Checkley—Checkley,’ he repeated. He could not—yet—express his

suspicious as to the old and faithful servant.
'Checkley also knows.'

At this point Checkley himself opened the door and brought in a card—that of the Bank manager.

'I have called,' said the visitor hurriedly, 'to tell you of something important, that happened this morning. I did not know it when we were talking over this business, Mr. Austin. It happened at ten o'clock as soon as the doors were open. A letter was brought by hand from Mr. Dering'——

'Another forgery! When will they stop?'

'——asking for those certificates to be given to the bearer—Mr. Edmund Gray's certificates. This was done. They are no longer at the Bank.'

'Oh! Then they have been warned,' cried George. 'Who was the messenger?'

'He was a boy. Looked like an office boy.'

'I will inquire directly if it was one of our boys. Go on.'

‘That settles the difficulty as to our action in case the papers are wanted by you. We no longer hold them. As to the dividends, we shall continue to receive them to the account of Mr. Edmund Gray until we get an order or an injunction.’

‘The difficulty,’ said George, ‘is to connect the case with Mr. Edmund Gray bodily. At present, we have nothing but the letters to go upon. Suppose the real Edmund Gray says that he knows nothing about it. What are we to do? You remember receiving the dividends for him. Has he drawn a cheque?’

‘No; we have never paid any cheque at all for him.’

‘Have you seen him?’

‘No; I have never seen him.’

‘It is a most wonderful puzzle. After all, the withdrawal of the papers can only mean a resolution to sell them. He must instruct somebody. He must appear in the matter.’

‘He may instruct somebody as he instructed me—in the name of Mr. Dering.’

‘ Another forgery.’

‘ Yes,’ said George. ‘ We must watch and find out this mysterious Edmund Gray. After all, it will not help us to say that a forged letter gave certain instructions to do certain things for a certain person—say the Queen—unless you can establish the complicity of that person. And that—so far—we certainly have not done. Meantime—what next?’

Obviously, the next thing was to find out if any of the office boys had taken that letter to the Bank. No one had been sent on that errand.

CHAPTER XIV

CHECKLEY'S CASE

THAT evening Mr. Checkley was not in his customary place at the *Salutation*, where his presence was greatly desired. He arrived late, when it wanted only a quarter to eleven. The faded barrister was left alone in the room, lingering over the day's paper with his empty glass beside him. Mr. Checkley entered with an air of triumph, and something like the elastic spring of a victor in his aged step. He called Robert, and ordered at his own expense, for himself, a costly drink—a compound of Jamaica rum, hot water, sugar and lemon, although it was an evening in July and, for the time of year, almost pleasantly warm. Nor did he stop here, for with the manner of

a man who just for once—to mark a joyful occasion—plunges, he rattled his money in his pocket and ordered another for the barrister. ‘For,’ he said, ‘this evening I have done a good work, and I will mark the day.’

When the glasses were brought, he lifted his and cried: ‘Come, let us drink to the confusion of all Rogues, great and small. Down with ’em!’

‘Your toast, Mr. Checkley,’ replied the barrister, ‘would make my profession useless; if there were no rogues, there would be no Law. That, however, would injure me less than many of my brethren. I drink, therefore, confusion to Rogues, great and small. Down with ’em.—This is excellent grog.—Down with ’em!’ So saying, he finished his glass and departed to his garret, where, thanks to the grog, he slept nobly, and dreamed that he was a Master in Chancery.

The reason of this unaccustomed mirth was as follows: Checkley by this time had fully established in his own mind the

conclusion that the prime mover in the deed—the act—the Thing—was none other than the new partner, the young upstart, whom he hated with a hatred unextinguishable. He was as certain about him as he had been certain about Athelstan Arundel, and for much the same reasons. Very well. As yet he had not dared to speak: King Pharaoh's chief scribe would have had the same hesitation at proffering any theory concerning Joseph. To-night, however—— But you shall hear.

Everybody was out of the office at half-past seven, when he left it. He walked round the empty rooms, looking into unlocked drawers—one knows not what he expected to find. He looked into Mr. Austin's room and shook his fist and grinned at the empty chair.

‘I'll have you yet,’ he said. ‘Oh, fox! fox! I'll have you, if I wait for thirty years!’

It adds an additional pang to old age when one feels that if the end comes prematurely, when one is only ninety or so, there may be a revenge unfinished. I have always envied the

dying hero who had no enemies to forgive because he had killed them all.

When Checkley left the place he walked across the Inn and so into Chancery Lane, where he crossed over and entered Gray's Inn by the Holborn archway. He lingered in South Square: he walked all round it twice: he read the names on the door-posts, keeping all the time an eye on No. 22. Presently, he was rewarded. A figure which he knew, tall and well proportioned, head flung back, walked into the Inn and made straight for No. 22. It was none other than Athelstan Arundel. The old man crept into the entrance, where he was partly hidden; he could see across the Square, himself unseen. Athelstan walked into the house and up the stairs: the place was quiet: Checkley could hear his steps on the wooden stairs: he heard him knock at a door—he heard the door open and the voices of men talking.

‘Ah!’ said Checkley, ‘now we’ve got ’em!’

Well—but this was not all. For presently there came into the Inn young Austin himself.

‘Oh!’ said Checkley, finishing his sentence—‘on toast. Here’s the other; here they are—both.’

In fact, George, too, entered the house known as No. 22 and walked up the stairs.

Checkley waited for no more. He ran out of the Inn and he called a cab.

If he had waited a little longer, he would have seen the new partner come out of the house and walk away: if he had followed him up the stairs, he would have seen him knocking at the closed outer door of Mr. Edmund Gray. If he had knocked at the door opposite, he would have found Mr. Athelstan Arundel in the room with his own acquaintance, Mr. Freddy Carstone, the Cambridge scholar and the ornament of their circle at the *Salutation*. But being in a hurry, he jumped to a conclusion and called a cab.

He drove to Palace Gardens, where Sir

Samuel had his town-house. Sir Samuel was still at dinner. He sat down in the hall, meekly waiting. After awhile the Service condescended to ask if he wished a message to be taken in to Sir Samuel.

‘From his brother’s—from Mr. Dering’s office, please tell him. From his brother’s office—on most important business—most important—say.’

Sir Samuel received him kindly, made him sit down, and gave him a glass of wine. ‘Now,’ he said, ‘tell me what it all means. My brother has had a robbery—papers and certificates and things—of course they are stopped. He won’t lose anything. But it is a great nuisance, this kind of thing.’

‘He has already lost four months’ dividends—four months, sir, on thirty-eight thousand pounds. And do you really think that he will get back his papers?’

‘Certainly—or others. They are, after all, only vouchers.—How is my brother?’

‘Well, Sir Samuel, better than you’d think

likely. This morning, to be sure'—— He stopped, being loth to tell how his master had lost consciousness. 'Well, sir, I've been thinking that the property was gone, and from what I know of them as had to do with the job, I thought there was mighty little chance of getting it back. It kept me awake. Oh! it's an awful sum. Close upon forty thousand pounds. He can stand that and double that'——

'And double that again,' said Sir Samuel. 'I should hope so.'

'Certainly, sir. But it's a blow—I can feel for him. I'm only a clerk; but I've saved a bit and put out a bit, Sir Samuel. Cheese-parings, you'd say; but I've enjoyed saving it up—oh! I've enjoyed it. I don't think there is any pleasure in life like saving up—watching it grow—and grow and grow—it grows like a pretty flower, doesn't it?—and adding to it. Ah!' he sighed, and drank his glass of wine. 'Sir Samuel, if I was to lose my little savings, it would break my heart. I'm an old

man, and so is he—it would break me up, it would indeed. Ever since yesterday morning, I've been thinking whether anything could happen to make me lose my money. There's Death in the thought. Sir Samuel—for an old man—and a small man—like me—there's Death in the thought.'

'Don't tell anybody where your investments are, and lock up the papers, Checkley.—Now, what do you want me to do for you?'

'I want you to listen to me for half an hour, Sir Samuel, and to give me your advice, for the business is too much for me.'

'Go on, then. I am listening.'

'Very well. Now, sir, I don't know if I shall be able to make my case clear—but I will try. I haven't been about Mr. Dering for fifty years for nothing, I hope. The case is this. Nine years ago, a man calling himself Edmund Gray took Chambers in South Square, Gray's Inn—forty pounds a year. He is represented as being an elderly man. He has paid his rent regularly, but he visits his

Chambers at irregular intervals. Eight years ago there was a forgery at your brother's. The cheque was payable to the order of Edmund Gray; mark that. The money was paid'——

'I remember. Athelstan Arundel was accused or suspected of the thing.'

'He was. And he ran away to avoid being arrested. Remember that. And he's never been heard of since. Well, the series of forgeries by which the shares and stocks belonging to Mr. Dering have been stolen are all written in the same handwriting as the first, and are all carried on in the name and for the order of Edmund Gray. That you would acknowledge in a moment if you saw the papers: there are the same lines and curves of the letters'——

'Which proves, I should say, that Athelstan never did it.'

'Wait a minute. Don't let's be in a hurry. The forgers by themselves could do nothing. They wanted some one in the office, some one

always about the place : some one who could get at the safe : some one who could get from the office what the man outside wanted : some one to intercept the letters'——

‘Well?’

‘That person, Sir Samuel, I have found.’

Sir Samuel sat up. ‘You have found him?’

‘I have. And here’s my difficulty. Because, Sir Samuel, he is your brother’s new partner; and unless we lodge him in the Jug before many days, he will be your own brother-in-law.’

Sir Samuel changed colour, and got up to see that the door behind the screen was shut. ‘This is a very serious thing to say, Checkley—a very serious thing.’

‘Oh! I will make it quite plain. First, as to opportunities; next, as to motives; third, as to facts. For opportunities, then. Latterly, for the last six months, he’s been working in the Chief’s office nearly all day long. There he sat, at the little table between the windows,

just half turned round to catch the light, with the open safe within easy reach of his hand when the Chief wasn't looking; or when—because he doesn't always touch the bell—Mr. Dering would bring papers into my office and leave him alone—ah! alone—with the safe. That's for opportunities. Now for motives. He's been engaged for two years, I understand, to a young lady'——

'To Lady Dering's sister.'

'Just so, sir. And I believe, until the unexpected luck of his partnership, against the wish of Lady Dering's family.'

'That is true.'

'He had two hundred a year. And he had nothing else—no prospects and no chances. So I think you will acknowledge that there's sufficient motive here for him to try anything.'

'Well, if poverty is a motive—no doubt he had one.'

'Poverty was the motive. You couldn't have a stronger motive. There isn't in the

whole world a stronger motive—though, I admit, some young men who are pore may keep honest. I did. Mr. Austin, I take it, is one of those that don't keep honest. That's for motive. Now for facts. Mr. Austin had nothing to do with the forgery eight years ago; he was only an artied clerk beginning. But he knew young Arundel who did the thing, remember. That cheque was written by young Arundel, who ran away. The letters of this year are written by *the same hand*—by your brother-in-law, Sir Samuel—by Mr. Athelstan Arundel.'

'But he is gone: he has disappeared: nobody knows where he is.'

Checkley laughed. This was a moment of triumph. 'He is back again, Sir Samuel. I have seen him.'

'Where? Athelstan back again?'

'I will tell you. All these forgeries use the name of Edmund Gray of 22 South Square, Gray's Inn. I have told you that before. When the thing is discovered, young Austin

goes off and makes himself mighty busy tracking and following up, hunting down, doing detective work, and so on. Oh! who so busy as he? Found out that Edmund Gray was an old man, if you please; and this morning again, so cheerful and lively that it does your heart good—going to settle it all in a day or two. Yah! As if I couldn't see through his cunning! Why! I'm seventy-five years old. I'm up to every kind of dodge: what will happen next, unless you cut in? First, we shall hear that Mr. Edmund Gray has gone abroad, or has vanished, or something. When he's quite out of the way, we shall find out that he did the whole thing—him and nobody else. And then if there's no more money to be made by keeping the papers, they will all come back—from Edmund Gray, penitent—oh! I know.'

'But about Athelstan Arundel?'

'To be sure. I'm an old man, Sir Samuel, and I talk too much. Well, I go most nights to a parlour in Holborn—the *Salutation* it is—

where the company is select and the liquor good. There I saw him a week ago. He was brought in by one of the company. I knew him at once, and he wasn't in hiding. Used his own name. But he didn't see me. No—no, thinks I. We won't give this away. I hid my face behind a newspaper. He's been staying in Camberwell for the last eight years, I believe, all the time.'

'In Camberwell? Why in Camberwell?'

'In bad company—as I was given to understand. In Prodigal Son's company.'

'You don't mean this, Checkley? Is it really true?'

'It is perfectly true, Sir Samuel. I have seen him. He was dressed like a Prince—velvet jacket and crimson tie and white waistcoat. And he walked in with just his old insolence—nose up, head back, looking round as if we were not fit to be in the same room with him—just as he used to do.'

'By Jove!' said Sir Samuel, thrusting his hands into his pockets. 'What will Hilda

say—I mean—Lady Dering, say, when she hears it?’

‘There is more to hear, Sir Samuel—not much more. But it drives the nail home—a nail in their coffin, I hope and trust.’

‘Go on. Let me hear all.’

‘You’ve caught on, have you, to all I said about Edmund Gray of 22 South Square—him as was mentioned eight years ago—and about the handwriting being the same now as then?’

‘Yes.’

‘So that the same hand which forged the cheque then has forged the letters now?’

‘Quite so.’

‘I said then—and I say now—that young Arundel forged that cheque. I say now that he is the forger of these letters, and that Austin stood in with him and was his confidant. What do you think of this? To-night, after office, I thought I would go and have a look at 22 South Square. So I walked up and down on the other side: my eyes are pretty

good still: I thought I should perhaps see something presently over the way. So I did. Who should come into the Square, marching along as if the old place, Benchers and all, belonged to him, but Mr. Athelstan Arundel! He pulled up at No. 22—No. 22, mind—Edmund Gray's number—he walked up-stairs—I heard him—to the second floor—Edmund Gray's floor.'

'Good Lord!' cried Sir Samuel. 'This is suspicious with a vengeance.'

'Oh! but I haven't done. I stayed where I was, wondering if he would come down, and whether I should meet him and ask him what he was doing with Edmund Gray. And then—I was richly rewarded—oh! rich was the reward, for who should come into the Square but young Austin himself! He, too, went up the stairs of No. 22. And there I left them both, and came away—came to put the case into your hands.'

'What do you want me to do?'

'I want you to advise me. What shall I

do? There is my case complete—I don't suppose you want a more complete case—for any Court of Justice.'

'Well, as for that, I'm not a lawyer. As a City man, if a clerk of mine was in such a suspicious position as young Austin, I should ask him for full explanations. You've got no actual proof, you see, that he, or Athelstan either, did the thing.'

'I beg your pardon, Sir Samuel. I'm only a clerk, and you're a great City Knight, but I don't know what better proof you want. Don't I see young Austin pretending not to know who Edmund Gray is, and then going up to his Chambers to meet his pal Athelstan Arundel? Ain't that proof? Don't I tell you that the same hand had been at work in both forgeries? Isn't that hand young Arundel's?'

'Checkley, I see that you are greatly interested in this matter'——

'I would give—ah!—twenty pounds—yes, twenty hard-earned pounds to see those two young gentlemen in the Dock—where they

shall be—where they shall be,' he repeated. His trembling voice, cracked with old age, seemed unequally wedded to the malignity of his words and his expression.

'One of these young gentlemen,' said Sir Samuel, 'is my brother-in-law. The other, unless this business prevents, will be my brother-in-law before many days. You will, therefore, understand that my endeavours will be to keep them both out of the Dock.'

'The job will be only half complete without; but still—to see young Austin drove out of the place—with disgrace—same as the other one was—why, that should be something—something to think about afterwards.'

Checkley went away. Sir Samuel sat thinking what was best to be done. Like everybody else, he quite believed in Athelstan's guilt. Granted that fact, he saw clearly that there was another very black-looking case against him and against George Austin. What should be done? He would consult his wife. He did so.

‘What will Elsie say?’ she asked. ‘Yet, sooner or later, she must be told. I suppose that will be my task. But she can wait a little. Do you go to-morrow morning to Mr. Dering and tell him. The sooner he knows the better.’

You now understand why Mr. Checkley was so joyous when he arrived at the *Salutation* and why he proposed that toast.

In the morning Sir Samuel saw his brother and whispered in his ear the whole of the case, as prepared and drawn up by Checkley. ‘What do you say?’ he asked when he had concluded.

‘I say nothing.’ Mr. Dering had heard all the points brought out one after the other without the least emotion. ‘There is nothing to be said.’

‘But, my dear brother, the evidence!’

‘There is no evidence. It is all supposition. If Athelstan committed the first forgery—there

is no evidence to show that he did—if he has been living all these years a life of profligacy in England—I have evidence to the contrary in my own possession—if he was tempted by poverty—if young Austin was also tempted by poverty—if the two together—or either separately—could undertake, under temptation, risks so terrible—you see, the whole case is built up on an “if.”’

‘Yet it holds together at every point. It is a perfect case. Who else could do it? Checkley certainly could not. That old man—that old servant.’

‘I agree with you, Checkley could not do it. Not because he is too old—age has nothing to do with crime—nor because he is an old servant. He could not do it because he is not clever enough. This kind of thing wants grasp and vision. Checkley hasn’t got either. He might be a confederate. He may have stopped the letters. He is miserly—he might be tempted by money. Yet I do not think it possible.’

‘No—I cannot believe that,’ said Sir Samuel.

‘Yet it is quite as difficult to believe such a thing of young Austin. Oh! I know everything is possible. He belongs to a good family: he has his own people to think of: he is engaged—he has always led a blameless life. Yet—yet—everything is possible.’

‘I have known cases in the City where the blameless seeming was only a pretence and a cloak—most deplorable cases, I assure you—the cloak to hide a profligate life.’

‘I think if that were so, I should not be deceived. Outward signs in such cases are not wanting. I know the face of the profligate, open or concealed. Young Austin presents no sign of anything but a regular and blameless life. For all these reasons, I say, we ought to believe him incapable of any dishonourable action. But I have been in practice for fifty years—fifty years—during this long period I know not how many cases—what are called family cases—have been in

my hands. I have had in this room the trembling old profligate of seventy, ready to pay any price rather than let the thing be known to his old wife, who believes in him, and his daughters, who worship him. I have had the middle-aged man of standing in the City imploring me to buy back the paper—at any price—which would stamp him with infamy. I have had the young man on his knees begging me never to let his father know the forgery, the theft, the villainy, the seduction—what not. And I have had women of every age sitting in that chair confessing their wickedness, which they do for the most part with hard faces and cold eyes, not like the men, with shame and tears. The men fall being tempted by want of money, which means loss of pride and self-respect, and position, and comfort. There ought to have been a clause in the Litany, “From want of money at all ages and on all occasions, Good Lord, deliver us.”’

‘True—most true,’ said Sir Samuel.
“From want of money”—I shall say this

next time I go to church—"from want of money at all ages, and particularly when one is getting on in years, and has a title to keep up—Good Lord, deliver us." Very good indeed, brother. I shall quote this in the City. To-morrow, I have to make a speech at the Helmet Makers' Company. I shall quote this very remarkable saying of yours.'

Mr. Dering smiled gravely. 'A simple saying, indeed. The greatest temptation of any is the want of money. Why, there is nothing that the average man will not do rather than be without money. He is helpless : he is a slave : he is in contempt : without money.—Austin, you tell me, was tempted by want of money. I think not. He was poor : he had enough to keep him : he was frugal : he had simple wants : he had never felt the want of money. No—I do not think that he was tempted by poverty. Everything is possible—this is possible.—But, brother, silence. If you speak about this, you may injure the young man, supposing him to be

innocent. If he is guilty, you will put him on his guard. And, mind, I shall show no foolish mercy—none—when we find the guilty parties. All the more reason, therefore, for silence.'

Sir Samuel promised. But he had parted with the secret—he had given it into the keeping of a woman.

CHAPTER XV

WHO IS EDMUND GRAY ?

ATHELSTAN laughed on the first hearing of the thing—it was on the Tuesday evening, the day after the discovery, and George was dining with him. He laughed both loud and long and with some of the old bitterness. ‘So the notes were in the safe all along, were they? Who put them there? “I,” says old Checkley, “with my pretty fingers—I put them there.”’

‘As soon as this other business is over, the Chief must tell your mother, Athelstan. It ought to come from him. I shall say nothing to Elsie just yet. She shall learn that you are home again, and that your name is clear again, at the same moment.’

‘I confess that I should be pleased to make them all confess that their suspicions were hasty and unfounded. At the same time I did wrong to go away; I ought to have stuck to my post. As for this other business, one thinks with something like satisfaction of the wise old lawyer losing forty thousand pounds. It made him sit up, did it? For such a man to sit up indicates the presence of deep emotion. Lost forty thousand pounds! And he who holds so strongly to the sanctity of Property! Forty thousand pounds!’

‘Well; but we shall recover the certificates, or get new ones in their place.’

‘I suppose so. Shares can’t be lost or stolen, really—can they? Meantime, there may be difficulty, and you must try to find the forger. Has it yet occurred to you that Checkley is the only man who has had control of the letters and access at all times to the office?’

‘It has.’

‘Checkley is not exactly a fox: he is a

jackal: therefore he does somebody's dirty work for him at a wage. That is the way with the jackal, you know. Eight years ago he tried to make a little pile by a little forgery—he did not commit the forgery, I am sure—but he did the jackal; only he forgot that notes are numbered: so when he remembered that, he put them back. Now, his friend the forger, who is no doubt a begging-letter writer, has devised an elaborate scheme for getting hold of shares—ignorant that they are of no value.'

'Well, he has drawn the dividends for four months.'

'That is something, you see; but he hoped to get hold of thirty-eight thousand pounds. It is the same hand at work, you infer from the writing. You are quite sure of that?'

'There can be no doubt of it. How could two different hands present exactly the same curious singularities?'

'And all the letters, cheques, and transfers for the same person. What is his name?'

‘One Edmund Gray, resident at 22 South Square, Gray’s Inn.’

‘No. 22? Oh! that is where Freddy Carstone lives. Do you know anything about the *nommé* Edmund Gray?’

‘I have been in search of information about him. He is described by the landlord of the rooms and by his laundress as an elderly gentleman.’

‘Elderly. Checkley is elderly.’

‘Yes, I thought of Checkley, of course. But somehow the indications don’t fit. My informants speak of a gentleman. Nobody at his kindest and most benevolent mood could possibly call Checkley a gentleman.’

‘The word gentleman,’ said Athelstan, ‘is elastic. It stretches with the employer or the consumer of it. It is like the word truth to a politician. It varies from man to man. You cannot lay down any definition of the word gentleman. Do you know nothing more about him?’

‘A little. He has held this set of Chambers

for nine years, and he pays his rent regularly before the day it falls due. Also I called upon him the other day when his laundress was at work and wrote a note to him at his table. The room is full of Socialist books and pamphlets. He is therefore, presumably, a Socialist leader.'

'I know all their leaders,' said Athelstan the Journalist. 'I've made the acquaintance of most for business purposes. I've had to read up the Socialist Literature and to make the acquaintance of their chiefs. There is no Edmund Gray among them. Stay—there is a Socialist letter in the *Times* of to-day—surely——Waiter'—they were dining at the club where Athelstan was a temporary member—'let me have the *Times* of to-day. Yes, I thought so. Here is a letter from the Socialist point of view, signed by Edmund Gray—and—and—yes—look here—it is most curious—with the same address—22 South Square—a long letter, in small print, and put in the supplement; but it's there. See; signed

“Edmund Gray.” What do you think of that, for impudence in a forger?’

George read the letter through carefully. It was a whole column long; and it was in advocacy of Socialism pure and simple. One was surprised that the editor had allowed it to appear. Probably he was influenced by the tone of it, which was generous, cheerful, and optimistic. There was not the slightest ring of bitterness about it. ‘We who look,’ it said, ‘for the coming disappearance of Property, not by violence and revolution, but by a rapid process of decay and wasting away, regard the present position of the holders of Property with the greatest satisfaction. Everywhere there are encouraging signs. Money which formerly obtained five per cent. now yields no more than half that rate. Shares which were formerly paying ten, twelve, and twenty per cent. are now falling steadily. Companies started every day in the despairing hope of the old great gains, fail and are wound up. Land, which the old wars forced up to

an extraordinary value, has now sunk so enormously that many landlords have lost three-fourths and even more of their income. All those enterprises which require the employment of many hands—as docks, railways, printing-houses, manufactories of all kinds—are rapidly falling into the condition of being able to pay no dividend at all, because the pay of the men and the maintenance of the plant absorb all. When that point is reached, the whole capital—the millions—embarked in these enterprises will be lost for ever. The stock cannot be sold because it produces nothing: it has vanished. In other words, sir, what I desire to point out to your readers is that while you are discussing or denouncing Socialism, the one condition which makes Socialism possible and necessary is actually coming upon the world—namely, the destruction of capital. Why have not men in all ages combined to work for themselves? Because capital has prevented them. When there is no capital left to employ them, to

bully them, to make laws against their combinations, or to bribe them, they will then have to work with and for themselves or starve. The thing will be forced upon them. Work will be a necessity for everybody: there will be no more a privileged class: all who work will be paid at equal rates for their work: those who refuse to work will be suffered to starve.'

The letter went on to give illustrations of the enormous losses in capital during the last fifteen years, when the shrinkage began. It concluded: 'For my own part, I confess that the prospect of the future fills me with satisfaction. No more young men idle, middle-aged men pampered, and old men looking back to a wasted life: nobody trying to save, because the future of the old, the widows, the children, the decayed, and the helpless, will be a charge upon the strong and the young—that is, upon the *juvenes*, the workers of the State. No more robbery: no more unproductive classes. Do not think that there will

be no more men of science and of learning. These, too, will be considered workers. Or no more poets, dramatists, artists, novelists. These, too, will be considered workers. And do not fear the coming of that time. It is stealing upon us as surely, as certainly, as the decay of the powers in old age. Doubt not that when it comes we shall have become well prepared for it. Those of us who are old may lament that we shall not live to see the day when the last shred of property is cast into the common hoard. Those of us who are young have all the more reason to rejoice in their youth, because they may live to see the Great Day of Humanity dawn at last.—EDMUND GRAY, 22 South Square, Gray's Inn.'

'You have read this?' asked George.

'Yes; I read it this morning before I knew the significance of the signature. Letter of a dreamer. He sees what might happen, and thinks that it will happen. Capital is too strong yet.'

‘Is this the letter of a forger, a conspirator—a thief?’

‘It does not strike me in that light. Yet many great thieves are most amiable in their private lives. There is no reason why this dreamer of dreams should not be also a forger and a thief. Still, the case would be remarkable, I admit.’

‘Can there be two Edmund Grays—father and son?’

‘Can there be a clerk to Edmund Gray, imprudently using his master’s name, and ready to open any letter that may come? Consider—Clerk is a friend of old Checkley. Clerk invents the scheme. Checkley does his share. However, we can easily find out something more about the man, because my old friend, Freddy Carstone, has Chambers on the same floor. We will walk over after dinner, and if Freddy happens to be sober—he is about this time pleasantly, not stupidly, drunk, as a rule—he will tell us what he knows about his neighbour.’

‘I ought to see Elsie this evening, but this is more important.’

‘Much more. Send her a telegram. Waiter, we will take coffee here. So. You have got the conduct of the case in your own hands. What has Checkley got?’

‘Nothing. I believe he is jealous of me. I don’t know why. But it does not matter what an old man like that thinks.’

‘Even an old man can strike a match and light a fire. Checkley is a malignant old man, He is quite capable of charging you with the job. I wonder he hasn’t done it by this time. Remember my case, old man.’ Athelstan’s face darkened at the recollection. ‘Dirt sticks sometimes. Look at me. I am smirched all over.’

‘His manner was very odd this morning—insolent and strange. He began to talk mysteriously of the ingratitude of the forger.’

‘Why he’s actually going to do it! Don’t you see—he means that you are the forger?’

‘Oh! does he? Very well, Athelstan’—

George finished his coffee and got up—‘the sooner we find out this mystery of this Edmund Gray the better. Let us seek your tipsy Scholar.’

They walked from Piccadilly to Holborn, turning the thing over and making a dozen surmises. Edmund Gray, twins: Edmund Gray, father and son—father wanting to destroy property, a Socialist; son wanting to steal property, individualist: Edmund Gray cousins—one the mild philosopher, rejoicing in the decay of wealth; the other a bandit, robber and conspirator: Edmund Gray, father and daughter—the young lady of the advanced type, who has not only thrown over her religion but her morals also: Edmund Gray, master and clerk: Edmund Gray under domination of a villain: there was in every situation a noble chance for the imagination. George showed a capacity unsuspected: he should have been a novelist. The hypothesis was always beautiful and admirable: but it wanted one thing—*vraisemblance*: one felt,

even while advancing and defending one, that it was impossible.

They turned into the Gateway of the Inn and walked down the passage into the Square. 'Look!' Athelstan caught his companion by the wrist. 'Who is that?'

'Checkley himself. He is coming out of No. 22!'

'Yes, out of 22. What is he doing there? Eh? What has he been doing there?'

It was Checkley. The old man walking feebly, with bent head, came out from the entrance of No. 22 and turned northward into Field Court. They waited, watching him, until he left the Square. 'What is he doing there?' asked George again. 'Come. Edmund Gray must be at home. Let us go up.'

They found the outer door shut. They knocked with their sticks: there was no answer.

'What was he doing here?' asked Athelstan.

The Scholar's door stood open. The Scholar himself was for once perfectly sober, and welcomed them joyously and boisterously.

‘We are here on business, Freddy,’ said Athelstan.

‘You are here to sit and talk and drink whisky-and-soda till midnight, till two o’clock in the morning. It is not until two in the morning that you can get the full flavour of the Inn. It is like a college then, monastic, shut off from the world, peaceful’——

‘Business first, then. You know your neighbour, Mr. Edmund Gray?’

‘Certainly. We exchange the compliments of the season and the news of the weather when we meet on the stairs. He has been in here, but not often. A man who drinks nothing is your true damper. That, believe me, and no other, was the veritable skeleton at the Feast.’

‘Our business concerns your neighbour, Mr. Edmund Gray. We want you to tell us what you know about him.’

‘Go on, then. Question, and I will answer, if I can.’

‘Does Mr. Edmund Gray live at these Chambers?’

‘No. He may sometimes sleep in them, but I should say not often. He calls at irregular intervals. Sometimes in the afternoon, sometimes in the morning, sometimes not for several weeks together. He is most uncertain.’

‘Do many people call upon him?’

‘No one ever calls upon him.’

‘Does he keep clerks? Does he carry on an extensive correspondence?’

‘I have never heard the postman knock at his door.’

‘Has he a son or a brother or a partner or anything?’

‘I don’t know. He may have these hindrances, but they are not apparent.’

‘What is his occupation or trade?’

‘He is a Socialist. He is athirst for the destruction of property. Meantime, I believe, he lives on his own. Perhaps his will be

spared to the last. He is an old gentleman of pleasant manners and of benevolent aspect. The old women beg of him ; the children ask him the time ; the people who have lost their way apply to him. He dreams all the time : he lives in a world impossible. Oh ! quite impossible. Why, in a world all Socialist, I myself should be impossible. They wouldn't have me. My old friend told me the other day that I should not be tolerated. They would kill me. All because I do no work—or next to none.'

George looked at Athelstan. ' We are farther off than ever,' he said.

' Mr. Edmund Gray believes that the Kingdom of Heaven is a kind of hive where everybody has got to work with enormous zeal, and where nobody owns anything. Also he thinks that it is close at hand, which makes him a very happy old gentleman.'

' This can't be Checkley,' said George.

' It would seem not,' Athelstan replied.
' Did you ever see another old man up here—

we saw him coming out just now—one Checkley, a lawyer's clerk?'

'No; not up here. There is an elderly person—a Party—of the name who uses the parlour of the *Salutation* where I myself sometimes—one must relax—Porson loved a tavern; so did Johnson—I myself, I say, sometimes forget that I used to belong to the Combination room, and sit with Checkley and his companions. But I do not think he is a friend of Mr. Gray. As well call the Verger the friend of the Bishop. Mr. Gray is a gentleman and a scholar; he is a man of generous instincts and culture. He *could* not be a friend of the man Checkley.'

'Yet we saw Checkley coming out of this very staircase.'

They talked of other things. They talked till midnight; when they came away the Scholar was at his best: one more glass—which he took after they left—would have turned the best into the worst,

‘We are as far off as before,’ said George.

‘No—we are so much the nearer that we know who Edmund Gray is not. He is not Checkley. He has no clerks. He has no visitors. He comes seldom. George, this looks to me suspicious. We met Checkley stealing out of the door. Why does Edmund Gray keep these Chambers? No business done there: no letters brought there: no callers: the man does not live there. The Socialism may be—must be—a blind. Why does the man keep on these Chambers?’

Meantime at the *Salutation* the usual company was assembled. ‘I fear,’ said the barrister, ‘that we shall not have our friend the Scholar here this evening. As I came down the stairs I saw him through his door receiving two gentlemen—young gentlemen. He will display his wonted hospitality upon them this evening instead.’ He sighed, and called for the glass of old and mild mixed,

which was all he could afford. Had the Scholar been with them, certainly there would have been a nobler and a costlier glass. He took up the morning paper and began to read it.

The conversation went on slowly and with jerks. A dull conversation: a conversation of men without ideas: a day-before-yesterday conversation: the slow exchange of short, solid sentences taken from the paper, or overheard and adopted. We sometimes praise the old tavern life, and we regret the tavern talk, We need not: it was dull, gross, ignorant, and flat: it was commonplace and conventional: because it was so dull, the men were fain to sing songs and to propose sentiments, and to drink more than was good for them. Why and when do men drink more than is good for them? First, when and because things are desperately dull: there is nothing to interest them: give them animation, thoughts, amusements, and they will not begin to drink. When they have begun, they will go on. When they have arrived at a certain stage, let them

drink as fast as they can, and so get out of the way, because they will never mend, and they only cumber the earth. Here is, you see, a complete solution—a short solution—of the whole drink question. It will not be accepted, because people like a long solution—a three-column solution.

The barrister lifted his head. ‘There is a letter here,’ he said, interrupting the ex-M.P., who was clearing the way for what he called an argument by an introduction in the usual form. ‘While on the one hand, gentlemen,’ he was saying, ‘I am free to confess’——

‘There is a letter here,’ he repeated in a louder voice. The barrister was now old, but he could still assume at times the masterful manner of counsel before the Court, ‘which should be read. It is a letter on Socialism.’

‘Ugh!’ said the money-lender. ‘Socialism! They want to destroy Property. Socialism! Don’t tell me, sir.’

‘It is a dream of what might be—a noble—a generous letter.’ He looked round him.

In their dull and fishy eyes there was no gleam or sparkle of response. 'I forgot,' he said; 'you cannot be interested in such a letter.—I beg your pardon, sir.' He bowed with great courtesy to the ex-M.P. 'I interrupted your valuable observations. We shall listen, I am sure, with—the—greatest'—— He buried his head in the paper again.

The legislator began again. 'As I was saying, gentlemen, when I was interrupted, on the subject of education and the ratepayers, being a ratepayer myself, as we all are, and having our taxes to pay, which is the only advantage we ever get from being a ratepayer, while on the one hand I am free to confess'——

'Why!' the barrister interrupted once again, 'this letter is from a man on our staircase, No. 22'——Checkley started——'an acquaintance of mine, if I can call him so, and of our friend the Scholar. A very able man, now somewhat in years. By name Edmund Gray.'

‘What?’ said Checkley, ‘Edmund Gray? You know Edmund Gray?’

‘Certainly. I have known him this nine years. Ever since he has been in the Inn.’

‘W-w-what sort of a man is he?’ Checkley stammered in his eagerness.

‘A very good sort of a man. Why do you ask?’

‘I want to know—for his advantage—oh! yes—yes—for his own advantage.’

‘Yes.’ The barrister retreated to his paper. ‘Oh, yes,’ he added. ‘Quite so.’

‘For his great personal advantage,’ Checkley repeated.—‘Robert, I think the gentleman would take a tumbler, if you will bring it—hot, Robert—strong—with lemon and sugar—a large rummer, Robert.’

The ancient barrister’s head behind the paper was observed to tremble.

Robert returned with his rummer, the glass spoon tinkling an invitation. Dinner had been but a sorry affair that day—a

stop-gap—insufficient in bulk ; the tempted man felt a yearning that could not be resisted. He stretched out his hand and took the glass and tasted it. Then turning to Checkley.

‘ You have purchased my speech, sir. You were asking me about Mr. Edmund Gray. What do you wish to know ? ’

‘ Everything—his business—his private life—anything.’

‘ As for his business, he has none ; he is a gentleman living on his means—like myself ; but his means are larger than my own : he has a residence elsewhere—I don’t know where ; he uses his Chambers but little : he has a collection of books there, and he keeps them for purposes of study.’

‘ Does he call there every day ? ’

‘ No. Only at irregular times. Sometimes not for many weeks together.’

‘ Has he got any friends ? ’

‘ I should say that he has no friends at all—at least none that come to the Inn. I have

never heard or seen anyone in his room. A quiet man. No slammer. An excellent man to have on the staircase. No trampler ; doesn't tramp up and down like an elephant. Isn't brought home drunk.'

'What does he look like?'

'He is a man advanced in years—perhaps seventy—a good-looking man—very cheerful countenance: tall and well set up still—wears a long frock coat. And that I believe is all I know about him.'

'That's all you've got to tell me, is it?'

'That is all, Mr. Checkley. Except that he has written a very remarkable letter to the *Times* of this morning.'

'Well, sir, if that is all, it isn't much for your rum-and-water, let me tell you.'

The barrister rose and poured the half-glass that remained into the cinders. 'Then let me drink no more than my information was worth,' he said ; and at the sight of so much magnanimity the broad earth trembled and Mr. Checkley sat aghast.

The ex-statesman cleared his throat and began again. ‘ After the third interruption, gentlemen, I may hope for a hearing. While, therefore, on the one hand ’——

CHAPTER XVI

THE VOICE OF DUTY

ELSIE in her studio was at work. She was painting a fancy portrait. You have seen how, before her interview with Mr. Dering, she transformed him from a hard and matter-of-fact lawyer into a genial, benevolent old gentleman. She was now elaborating this transformation. It is a delightful process, known to every portrait-painter, whereby a face faithfully represented becomes the face of another person, or the face as it might be, so that a hard and keen face, such as Mr. Dering's, may become a face ennobled with spiritual elevation, benevolence, charity, and kindness of heart. Or, on the other hand, without the least change of feature, this hard

keen face may become, by the curve of a line or the addition of a shadow, the face of a cruel and pitiless Inquisitor. Or, again, any face, however blurred and marred by the life of its owner, may by the cunning portrait-painter be restored to the face intended by its Maker, that is to say, a sweet and serious face. Great indeed is the power, marvellous is the mystery, of the limner's art.

‘Now,’ Elsie murmured, ‘you look like some great philanthropist—a thoughtful philanthropist, not a foolish person: your high forehead and your sharp nostril proclaim that you are no impulsive gusher: your kindly eyes beam with goodness of heart: your lips are firm because you hate injustice. Oh, my dear guardian, how much I have improved you! Something like this you looked when you told me of my fortune—and like this when you spoke of your dream, and your illusions—something like this—you looked.’

She went on working at her fantasy, crooning a simple ditty, composed of many

melodies running into one, as girls use when they are quite happy. The afternoon was hot. Outside, Elsie's windows looked upon a nest of little London gardens, where nasturtiums twisted round strings upon the walls; hollyhocks and sunflowers, which love the London smoke, lifted their heads; and Virginia creepers climbed to the house-tops. The little London gardens do sometimes look gay and bright in the yellow glow of a July afternoon. The window was open, and the room was almost as hot as the street outside; we get so few hot days that one here and there cannot be too hot. On the table lay a photograph of her lover; over the mantel hung her own drawing in Pastel of that swain; on her finger was his ring: round her neck lay his chain: all day long she was reminded of him, if she should cease for a moment to think of him. But there was no need of such reminder. It was Friday afternoon, four days after the great Discovery. Elsie had been informed of the event, the news of which she received after

the feminine manner, with an ejaculation of surprise and an interjection of sympathy. But one cannot expect a girl on the eve of her marriage to be greatly distressed because her guardian, a rich man, is annoyed by the temporary loss of certain shares. And as to finding the criminal and getting back those shares—it was man's work. All the troublesome and disagreeable part of the world's work belongs to man.

It was nearly five o'clock. Elsie was beginning to think that she had done enough, and that, after tea, a walk in the Gardens might be pleasant. Suddenly, without any noise or warning of steps outside, her door was opened and her sister Hilda appeared. Now, so swift is the feminine perception, that Elsie instantly understood that something had happened—something bad—something bad to herself. For first, the door was opened gently, as in a house of mourning; and next, Hilda had on a dress—lavender with heliotrope, costly, becoming, sympathetic, and sorrowful

—a half-mourning dress—and she stood for a moment at the door with folded hands, her classical head inclined a little downward to the left, and her eyes drooping—an artistic attitude of sadness. Hilda not only said the right thing and held the proper sentiments, but she liked to assume the right attitude and to personate the right emotion. Now it is given to woman, and only to her when she is young, tall, and beautiful, to express by attitude all or any of the emotions which transport or torture her fellow-creatures. Hilda, you see, was an artist.

‘Come in, dear,’ said Elsie. ‘I am sure that you have got something disagreeable to tell me.’

Hilda kissed her forehead. ‘My poor child,’ she murmured. ‘If it could have been told you by anybody else!’

‘Well—let us hear it. Is it anything very disagreeable?’

‘It is terrible. I tremble—I dare not tell you. Yet I must. You ought to know’

‘If you would go on. It is much more terrible to be kept in suspense.’

‘It is about George.’

‘Oh?’ said Elsie, flaming. ‘I have had so much trouble about George already, that I did think’——

‘My dear, all opposition of the former kind is removed, as you know. This is something very different. Worse,’ she added in a hollow voice—‘far worse.’

‘For Heaven’s sake, get along.’

‘He has told you about the dreadful robbery. Of course you have talked about nothing else since it happened. I found my mother full of it.’

‘Yes—George is in charge of the case. He says that everything must be recovered, and that Mr. Dering will in the end suffer no more injury than the trouble of it.’

‘That may be so. Elsie—I hardly dare to tell you—there is a clue. Checkley has got that clue, and has told Sir Samuel everything. He is following up the clue. I

shudder to think of it. The man is as relentless as a bloodhound.'

'Does that clue concern me?' Her cheek became pale because she guessed—she knew not what.

'Sir Samuel, against his will, is convinced that Checkley has found the clue. He has told me the whole. He has consented to my telling the dreadful story to my mother and to you—and now I am afraid. Yet I must.'

Elsie made a gesture of impatience.

'Go back, Elsie, eight years, if you can. Remember the wretched business of our unworthy brother.'

'I remember it. Not unworthy, Hilda. Our most unfortunate brother. Why, they have found the very notes he was charged with stealing. They were found in the safe on the very day when they made the other discovery. Have they not told you?'

'Checkley told Sir Samuel. He also remembers seeing Athelstan place the packet in the safe.'

‘Oh! Does he dare to say that? Why, Hilda, the robbery was proved to lie between himself and Athelstan. If he saw that, why did he not say so? He keeps silence for eight long years, and then he speaks.’

Hilda shook her head sadly. ‘I fear,’ she said, ‘that we cannot accept the innocence of our unfortunate brother. However, Athelstan was accused of forging Mr. Dering’s handwriting and signature. In this new forgery, the same handwriting is found again—exactly the same. The forger is the same.’

‘Clearly, therefore, it cannot be Athelstan. That settles it.’

‘Yes—unfortunately—it does settle it. Because, you see, Athelstan is in London. He is said to have been living in London all the time—in some wretched place called Camberwell, inhabited, I suppose, by run-aways and low company of every kind. He has lately been seen in the neighbourhood of Gray’s Inn, apparently passing under his own

name. Checkley has seen him. Another person has seen him.'

'Have you come to tell me that Athelstan is charged with this new wickedness?'

'The forger must have had an accomplice in the office; a man able to get at the safe: able to intercept the post: acquainted with Mr. Dering's ways: such a man as—say—Checkley—or—the only other possible—George.' Hilda paused.

'Oh! This is too absurd. You are now hinting that George—my George,' she said proudly, 'was the confederate of Athelstan—no—of a forger.'

'They have been seen together. They have been seen together at the house from which the forger addresses his letters. Has George told you that he has known all along—for eight years—of Athelstan's residence in London?'

Observe how that simple remark made in the *Salutation* Parlour, that Athelstan must have been living in Camberwell, had by this

time grown into a complete record of eight years' hiding, eight years' disgraceful company on the part of one, and eight years' complicity and guilty knowledge on the part of the other. Hilda had not the least doubt. It was quite enough for her that Checkley said so. Half the contents of our newspapers are conducted on the same confiding principle.

'If George has not told me,' Elsie replied, 'it must be for some good reason. Perhaps he was pledged to secrecy.'

'My dear'—Hilda rose impressively with fateful face—'the hand that forged the letters is the hand that forged the cheque—your brother's hand. The hand that took the certificates from the safe'—she laid her own upon Elsie's hand—'the hand of the confederate, my poor sister, is—your lover's hand.'

'I knew,' said the girl, 'that you were coming to this. I have felt it from the beginning.'

'Remember, the thing was done in the months of February, March, and April. First

of all, Athelstan was then, as now, desperately poor: the life that he has led for the last eight years—the life of a—a—Camberwell profligate’—she spoke as if that respectable suburb was the modern Alsatia—‘has certainly destroyed whatever was left of honour and of principle. There comes a time, I have read, in the career of every wicked man when he hesitates no longer whatever means are offered him of making money. Athelstan it was—so they believe—who devised this scheme, which has been as successful as it is disgraceful. My dear Elsie, this is the most terrible disgrace that has ever befallen my family: the most dreadful and the most unexpected calamity for you.’

Elsie caught her sister by the wrist. ‘In the name of God, Hilda, are you telling me what is proved and true, or what is only suspected?’

‘I am telling you what is as good as proved. More than suspected.’

‘As good as proved. Oh!’ Elsie drew a

long breath. 'As good as proved. That is enough. Like Athelstan's guilt eight years ago,' she flared out suddenly, springing up again and walking about the room. 'Oh! it is wonderful!' she cried—'wonderful! What a family we are! We had a brother, and we believed that he was an honourable gentleman, as the son of his father must be. Then there was a charge, a foolish charge, based upon nothing but may—have—been and must—have—been—— We believed the charge'——

'Because we had no choice but to believe, Elsie,' her sister interrupted. 'Do you think we wanted to believe the charge?'

'We should have believed him innocent until the thing was proved. We did not. We cast him out from among us; and now, after eight years—he has come back poor, you say, and sunk so low that he is ashamed to see his people, and we are going to believe another charge based on may have been and must have been. No, Hilda. I will not believe it—I will not.—And then there is

George. If I cease to believe in his honour and his truth, I cease to believe in everything. I cannot believe in Heaven itself unless I believe in my lover. Why, his heart is light about this business: he is not concerned: he laughs at that old man's ravings. Ravings? If Athelstan is right, then his is the hand that has done it all—his—Hilda—Checkley is the man concerned with both crimes.'

Hilda shook her head. 'No, Elsie, no. The old man is above suspicion.'

'Why should he be above suspicion more than George? And you ask me on the first breath of accusation to treat George as you treated Athelstan. Well—Hilda, I will not.'

'I make every allowance for you, Elsie. It is a most dreadful business—a heart-breaking business. You may misrepresent me as much as you please—I will continue to make allowances for you. Meantime, what will you do?'

'Do? What should I do? Nothing,

nothing, nothing. I shall go on as if this thing had never happened.'

'Sir Samuel ordered me to warn you most seriously. If you consent to see him again'——

'Consent? Consent? Why should I refuse? In a fortnight he will be my husband and my master, whom I must obey. He calls me his mistress now, but I am his servant. Consent to see him?' She sat down and burst into tears.

'If you see him again,' her sister continued, 'warn him to leave the country. The thing is so certain that in a day or two the proofs will be complete, and it will then be too late. Make him leave the country. Be firm, Elsie. Better still, refuse to see him at all and leave him to his fate. What a fate! What madness!'

'We allowed Athelstan to leave the country. He ought to have stayed. If I advise George at all I shall advise him to stick to his post and see the business through. If

he were to leave the country, I would go with him.'

'You are infatuated, Elsie. I can only hope that he may fly the country of his own accord. Meantime, there is one other point'——

'What is it? Pray, don't spare me, Hilda. After what has gone before, it must be a very little point.'

'You are bitter, Elsie, and I don't deserve your bitterness. But that is nothing. At such a moment everything must be pardoned and permitted. The point is about your wedding. It is fixed for the 12th of next month, less than three weeks from to-day. You must be prepared to put it off.'

'Indeed! Because you say that a thing impossible is as good as proved! Certainly not, Hilda.'

'I have come here to-day, Elsie, by Sir Samuel's express wish, in order to soften the blow and to warn you. Whether you will tell—that unhappy young man or not, is for

you to decide. Perhaps, if you do, he may imitate our unworthy brother and run away. If he does not, the blow will fall to-morrow—to-day—the day after to-morrow—I know not when. He will be arrested : he will be taken before a magistrate : he will be remanded : he will be out on bail. Oh, Elsie, think of marrying a man out on bail ! One might as well marry a man in convict dress. Oh ! Horrible ! ’

‘I would rather marry George in convict dress than any other man in fine raiment. Because, once more, the thing is impossible.’

‘You carry your faith in your lover beyond bounds, Elsie. Of course a girl is right to believe in a man’s honour. It makes her much more comfortable, and gives her a sense of security. Besides, we always like to believe that we are loved by the best of men. That makes us feel like the best of women.—But in this case, when I tell you that Sir Samuel—a man who has always lived among money—so to speak—and knows how money

is constantly assailed—is firmly convinced of George's complicity, I do think that you might allow something for human frailty. In the case of Athelstan, what did Mr. Dering say? Everything is possible. So I say of George Austin, everything is possible.'

'Not everything. Not that.'

'Yes, even that.—What do you know of his private life? Why has he concealed the fact of Athelstan's residence in London? Why has he never told us of his friendship with that unfortunate outcast?'

'I don't know. He has his reasons.'

'It is a most dreadful thing for you,' Hilda went on. 'And after getting to believe in the man and—well—becoming attached to him—though such attachments mean little and are soon forgotten—and after going the length of fixing the day and ordering the dress and the wedding-cake and putting up the banns—— Oh! it is a wretched business—a horrible misfortune. The only thing to be said is that in such a case, the fact being known to every-

body, no one can blame a girl ; and perhaps, in the long run, she will suffer no injury from it. Our circle, for instance, is so different from that of this young man's friends, that the thing would not even be known among us.'

'I believe, Hilda, you will drive me mad.'

'My dear, one must look ahead. And remember that I look ahead for you. As for the young man, I dissociate him henceforth from you. What he does and where he goes I do not inquire, or care about any more than I trouble myself about a disgraceful brother. Some acts cut a man off from his mistress—from his sisters—from the world.'

'Do not talk any more,' said Elsie. 'Let the blow, as you call it, fall when it pleases. But as for me, I shall not warn George that he is to be charged with dishonesty, any more than I will believe him capable of dishonesty.'

'Well, my dear, there is one comfort for us. You may resolve on marrying him. But

a man charged with a crime—out on bail—cannot marry any girl. And he will be charged, and the evidence is very strong.’

‘No doubt. As good as proved—as good as proved. Poor George! Who never had ten pounds in the world until he was made a partner’——

‘True. And there we have the real motive. Seek the motive, Sir Samuel says, and we shall find the criminal. Here you have the reason of the secret partnership with Athelstan. Poverty is the tempter—Athelstan is the suggester.’

Elsie shook her head impatiently.

‘Mr. Dering was to give you away. Who will now? Athelstan? How can we—Sir Samuel and I—assist at a wedding where the bridegroom lies under such a charge?—by one so near to us as Mr. Dering? How can your mother be present? Oh, Elsie, think!’

Elsie shook her head again, with greater impatience.

‘Think what a fate you may be dragging

upon yourself! Think of possible children with such a brand upon them!’

‘I think only of an honourable and an innocent man.’

‘I have just come from my mother, Elsie. She says positively that if the charge is brought, the wedding must be put off until the man is cleared. And for the moment she does not feel strong enough to meet him. You can receive him here, if you please. And she desires that there may be no disputes or arguments about it.’

‘It is truly wonderful!’ Elsie walked to the open window and gasped as if choking. ‘Wonderful!’ she repeated. ‘The same fate—in the same manner—threatens George that fell upon Athelstan. And it finds us as ready to believe in the charge and to cast him out. Now, Hilda, go to my mother and tell her that though the whole world should call George—my George—a villain, I will marry him. Tell her that though I should have to take him from the prison door, I will marry

him. Because, you see, all things are not possible. This thing is impossible.'

'We shall have trouble with Elsie,' Lady Dering told her mother. 'Call her soft and yielding? My dear, no mule was ever more stubborn. She will marry her convict, she says, even at the prison door.'

CHAPTER XVII

WAS HE IN RAGS?

STUBBORN as a mule. Yes—it is the way with some girls: man is soft as wax compared with woman: man concedes, compromises, gives way, submits: woman has her own way—when that way is the right way she becomes a pearl above price.

Elsie, when the door was shut and her sister gone, stood silent, immovable. A red spot burned in her cheeks: her eyes were unnaturally bright: her lips parted: she was possessed by a mighty wrath and great determination: she was the tigress who fights for her beloved. Meantime, everything was changed: the sunshine had gone out of the day: the warmth out of the air: her work,

that had pleased her so much an hour ago, seemed a poor weak thing not worth thinking about. Everything was a trifle not worth thinking about—the details of her wedding: her presents: her honeymoon: her pretty flat—all became insignificant compared with this threatened charge against her lover. How was it to be met? If it was only a suspicion put into shape by Sir Samuel and old Checkley it would be best to say nothing. If it was really going to be brought against him, would it not be best to warn him beforehand? And about her brother——

She sat down and wrote out the facts. To be doing this cleared her brain, and seemed like working for her lover. In March 1882 a cheque for 720*l.* to the order of one Edmund Gray was cashed in ten-pound notes by a commissionnaire sent from an hotel in Arundel Street, Strand. No one ever found out this Edmund Gray. Athelstan was suspected. The notes themselves were never presented, and were found the other day in Mr. Dering's

safe, covered with dust, at the back of some books.

In February, March, and April, by means of forged letters, a great quantity of shares were transferred from the name of Edward Dering to that of Edmund Gray. The writing of the letters was the same as that of the forged cheque.

These were the only facts. The rest was all inference and presumption. Athelstan had been seen in London: Athelstan had been living all the time in London: Athelstan had been seen going into the house which was given as the residence of Edmund Gray. Well—Athelstan must be seen the very first thing. Further than this point she could not get. She rang the bell, ordered tea to be brought to her own room, and then put on her hat and went out to the Gardens, where she walked about under the trees, disquieted and unhappy. If a charge is going to be brought against him, the most innocent man in the world must be disquieted until he knows the nature of the

evidence against him. Once satisfied as to that, he may be happy again. What evidence could they bring against George?

She went home about eight, going without dinner rather than sit down with her mother. It is a miserable thing for a girl to be full of hardness against her mother. Elsie already had experience, as you have seen. For the present, better not to meet at all. Therefore she did not go home for dinner, but took a bun and a cup of coffee—woman's substitute for dinner—at a confectioner's.

When George called about nine o'clock, he was taken into the studio, where he found Elsie with the traces of tears in her eyes.

‘Why, Elsie,’ he cried, ‘what is the matter? Why are you crying, my dear? and why are you alone in this room?’

‘I choke in this house, George. Take me out of it—take me away. Let us walk about the Squares and talk. I have a good deal to say.’

‘Now, dear, what is it?’—when they

were outside. 'What happened? You are trembling—you have been shaken. Tell me, dear.'

'I don't think I can tell you just at present—not all.'

'Something then—the rest afterwards. Tell me by instalments.'

'You are quite happy, George? Nobody has said anything to make you angry, at the office, or anywhere else?'

'Nobody. We are going on just the same. Mr. Dering thinks and talks about nothing but the robbery. So do I. So does everybody else. I suppose Checkley has told, for every clerk in the place knows about it, and is talking about it. Why do you ask if anybody has made me angry?'

'My dear George, Hilda has been here this afternoon. You know that—sometimes—Hilda does not always say the kindest things about people.'

'Not always. I remember when she wrote me a letter asking whether I thought that a

lawyer's clerk was a fit aspirant for the hand of her sister. Not always just the kindest things. But I thought we were all on the most affectionate terms, and that everything had been sponged out. Has she been saying more kind, sisterly, things about me? What have I done now? Isn't the money difficulty solved?'

'I will tell you some other time—not now—what she said. At the present moment I want to ask you a question. If you have reasons for not answering, say so, and I shall be quite satisfied; but answer me if you can. This is the question. Hilda says that Athelstan is secretly in London, and that you know it, and that you have been seen with him. Is that true?'

'Well—Elsie—the only reason for not telling you that Athelstan is here is that he himself made me promise not to tell you. Athelstan is in London. I see him often. I shall see him this evening after leaving you. He is in London, walking about openly. Why

not? I know no reason for any concealment. But he cannot go to see his mother, or enter his mother's house, until this charge against him has been acknowledged to be baseless. As for you, he will be the first person to visit you—and will be your most frequent visitor—when we are married. He is always talking about you. He is longing for the time when he can see you openly. But nothing will persuade him to come here. He is still bitter against his mother and against Hilda.'

Elsie sighed. 'It is very terrible—and now—— But go on.'

'I have answered your question, Elsie.'

'Oh, no. I have only just begun. You say that Athelstan is in London; but you do not tell me what he is doing and how he fares.'

'He fares very well, and he is prosperous.'

'Hilda says that he has been living in some wretched quarter of London all these years; that he has been frequenting low company;

and that he has been, until the last few weeks, in rags and penniless.'

George laughed aloud. 'Where on earth did Hilda get this precious information? Athelstan in a low quarter? Athelstan a Prodigal? Athelstan in rags? My dearest Elsie, if Lady Dering were not your sister, I should say that she had gone mad with venomous hatred of the brother whom she made so much haste to believe guilty.'

'Oh! Tell me quick, George. Don't say anything against Hilda, please. I am already—— Tell me quick the whole truth.'

'Well, dear, the whole truth is this. Athelstan is doing very well. I suppose you might call him prosperous. When he went away, he had ten pounds to begin with. People kindly credited him with the nice little sum of 720*l.* obtained by a forgery. We now know that this money has been lying in the safe all the time—how it got there, the Lord knows—perhaps Checkley could tell. He went to America by the cheapest way possible.

He had many adventures and many ups and downs, all of which he will tell you before long. Once he had great good fortune on a silver mine or something : he made thousands of pounds over it. Then he lost all his money—dropped it down a sink or into an open drain—you know, in America, these traps are plentiful, and started again on his ten pounds. He was a journalist all the time, and he is a journalist still. He is now over here as the London correspondent of a great paper of San Francisco.—That, my dear Elsie, is, briefly, the record of your brother since he went away.'

'Oh ! But are you quite sure, George ?—quite—quite sure ? Because, if this can be proved'——

'Nothing is more easy to prove. He brought letters to a London Bank introducing him as the correspondent, and empowering him to draw certain moneys.'

'How long has Athelstan been at home ?'
She remembered the dates of the recent

forgeries, and the alleged fact that all were in the same handwriting.

‘You are so persistent, Elsie, that I am certain you have got something serious on your mind—won’t you tell me?’

‘No, George—not to-night. But—how long has Athelstan been in England?’

‘I will tell you exactly how and when I met him. Do you remember three weeks ago, that Sunday evening when we were so happy and so miserable—resolved on braving everything—going to live on love and a crust for the rest of our lives?—you poor, dear, brave girl!’ He touched her fingers. ‘I shall always be thankful for that prospect of poverty, because it revealed my mistress to me in all her loveliness of love and trust and courage.’

‘Oh, George—you spoil me. But then I know myself better.’

‘Well—on that evening we went to Church together; and after Church, as I was not allowed in the house, we walked round and

round the Square until the rain came on, and we had to go home. Well, you did not take any notice ; but as you stood on the steps waiting for the door to be opened, a man was standing on the kerb under the lamp close by. When the door was shut behind you, I turned and walked away. This man followed me and clapped me on the shoulder. It was Athelstan.'

‘ And I saw him and did not know him ! ’

‘ He has grown a big beard now, and wore a felt hat. He is a picturesque object to look at. Ought to have been one of Drake’s men. I daresay he was in a former existence. He had then been in England exactly a week, and every day he had prowled about the place in the hope of seeing you—not speaking to you—he trusted that you would not know him again.’

‘ Oh, poor Athelstan ! That is nearly three weeks ago. He has been in England four weeks—a month—and three—four—five months ago—where was he ? ’

‘I told you. In California.’

‘Oh! then he could not—possibly—not possibly—and it can be proved—and oh! George—George—I am so glad—I am so glad.’ She showed her joy by a light shower of tears.

‘Why, my dear,’ he said, soothing her, ‘why are you so troubled and yet so glad?’

‘You don’t quite understand, George. You don’t know the things that are said. All these forgeries are in the same handwriting.’

‘Certainly.’

‘One man has written all these letters and cheques and things—both that of eight years ago and those of last March?’

‘That is perfectly certain.’

‘Then, don’t you see? Athelstan was out of England when these newly-discovered forgeries were done. Therefore, he had no hand in them. Therefore, again, he could have had no hand in the earlier one. Why—you establish his innocence perfectly. Now you see one of the reasons why I was so glad.’

The other reason—that this fact destroyed at one blow the whole of the splendid edifice constructed upon the alleged stay of Athelstan in London—Elsie concealed. Her heart, it must be acknowledged, was lightened. You may have the most complete belief in the innocence of a person, but it is well to have the belief strengthened by facts.

‘As for me,’ said George, ‘I have been so long accustomed to regard him as one of the worst used of men, that I never thought of that conclusion. Of course, if the handwriting is the same, and it certainly seems the same—a very good imitation of Mr. Dering’s hand—there is nothing now to be said. Athelstan was in California in the spring. That settles it. And the notes were in the safe. Two clinchers. But to some minds a suspicion is a charge, and a charge is a fact.’

‘George, you must take me to Athelstan. Give me his address.’

‘He is in lodgings in Half Moon Street. I will ask him if he will meet you.’

‘No—no ; let me go to him. It is more fitting. You will see him presently. Will you tell him that I will call upon him to-morrow morning at eleven ? And tell him, George, that something has happened—something that makes it impossible for me to remain at home—even for the short time before our wedding.’

‘Elsie ! this is very serious.’

‘Yes, it is very serious. Tell him that I shall ask him to receive me until the wedding, or until certain things have happened.—But in any case—oh ! they must happen so—they must—it is too absurd.’

‘Elsie, my dear, you grow interjectional.’

‘Yes—yes. I mean, George, that if things turn out as I hope they may, I will go home again. If not, we will be married from Athelstan’s lodgings.’

‘And you will not tell me what this terrible business is ?’

‘Not to-night, George,’ she repeated. ‘It

is very serious, and it makes me very unhappy that my mother and sister'——

'It is something to do with me, Elsie, clearly. Never mind. You will tell me when you please. Whatever you do is sure to be right. I will see him this evening.'

'Thank you, George. I think that what I propose is the wisest thing to do. Besides, I want to be with you and Athelstan. Tell him that as he left the house eight years ago I leave it now.'

'You? Why, my dear child, what forgeries have you been committing?'

'None. And yet—— Well, George, that is enough about me and my troubles. Tell me now about your search into this business. How have you got on?'

'There is nothing new to report. I told you that I left a note on Edmund Gray's table. No answer has come to that. The Bank has written to tell him that his letter of introduction was a forgery. No answer. The dividends are accumulating: he draws no

cheques: he makes no sign. In a word, though this money is lying to his credit, and the shares are transferred to his name, and the letters give his address, there is nothing whatever to convict the man himself. We could not prove his signature, and he has taken none of the money. He might call any day and say that he knew nothing about it. I wonder he hasn't done it. When he does, we shall just have to put everything straight again. As for poor old Checkley, I really believe that he is going mad. If I meet him he glares; if he is in his master's room, his eyes follow me about under his shaggy eyebrows with a malignity which I have never seen painted. As for being described, words couldn't do it. I suppose he sees that the end is inevitable. Really, Elsie, the man would murder me if he dared.'

'The man is dangerous, George, as well as malignant. But I think he will do you no harm in the long run. Have you told Athelstan what is going on?'

‘Certainly. He follows the business with the greatest interest. He agrees with me that the thing is done out of the office with the help of some one in it. Now, the point is, that the man in the office must have the control of the post. All the letters must pass through his hands. Who is that man? No one but Checkley. Everything turns on that. Now, here is a lucky accident. An old friend of Athelstan’s, a man who coaches, has Chambers on the same stairs and on the same floor. He knows this Mr. Edmund Gray. We have been to his rooms to question him.’

‘Is it to see this old friend that Athelstan visits No. 22?’

‘Yes. His name is Carstone—commonly called Freddy Carstone—a pleasing man, with a little weakness, which seems to endear him to his friends.’

‘This is the way in which things get distorted in a malignant mind! Well. What did this gentleman tell you about this mysterious Edmund Gray?’

‘Nothing definite. That he is some kind of Socialist we knew before: that he has occupied the Chambers for ten years or so we knew before. Also, that he is an elderly gentleman of benevolent aspect. And that he is irregular in his visits to his Chambers. We seem to get no further. We see Checkley coming out of the house. That connects him, to be sure. But that is not much. There is no connection established between Edmund Gray and the forgeries in his name. Nor between Checkley and the forgeries. One feels that if one could lay hold of this mysterious elderly gentleman, a real step in advance would be taken.’

‘You talked at first of arresting him on the charge.’

‘Well—there is no evidence. His name has been used—that is all. On that evidence no magistrate would issue a warrant. Sometimes one’s head goes round with the bewilderment of it. I’ve managed to learn something about Checkley in the course of these inquiries.

He is quite a great man, Elsie ; a tavern oracle in the evening ; a landlord and householder and collector of his own rents at odd hours ; a capitalist and a miser. But he is not, as thought at first—Edmund Gray.’

They had by this time got round to the house again. ‘Go, now, George,’ said Elsie. ‘See Athelstan this evening. Tell him that I must go to him. I will tell him why to-morrow.’

‘If he is not at his club I will go to his lodgings. If he is not there I will wait till he comes home. And before I go home I will drop a note for you.—Good-night, sweetheart—good-night.’

CHAPTER XVIII

THE PRODIGAL AT HOME

IN the morning, Elsie rose at seven and put together such things as she would want for the three weeks before her marriage, if she was to spend that interval under her brother's care. At eight o'clock she received her letters—including one in a handwriting she did not know. She opened it.

‘Dear Elsie,’ it said, ‘come to me at once. Come early. Come to breakfast at nine. I will wait for you till ten, or any time.

‘Your affectionate brother,

‘ATHELSTAN.’

‘Oh!’ she murmured. ‘And I did not

know his writing. And to think that I am twenty-one, and he is thirty-one ; and that I have never had a letter from him before !’

Her boxes were packed. She put on her jacket and hat and descended into the breakfast-room, where her mother was already opening her letters and waiting breakfast.

‘You are going out, Elsie?’ she asked coldly.

‘Yes. Hilda told you, I suppose, what she came here for yesterday. In fact, you sent me a message.’

‘I hope she delivered it correctly.’

‘She said that you would not sanction my wedding while this charge, or suspicion, was hanging over George’s head. And that you would not see him until it was withdrawn or cleared away.’

‘Certainly. In such a case it would be worse than hypocrisy to receive him with friendliness.’

‘Then, like Hilda, you accept the conclusion.’

‘I am unable to do anything else. The conclusion seems to me inevitable. If not, let him explain. I hope that no time will be lost in bringing the formal charge. It is foolish kindness—real cruelty—to all concerned to keep such a thing hanging over our heads. I say *our* heads, not yours only, Elsie, because you know your brother is implicated—perhaps the real contriver—of the dreadful scheme.’

‘Would you believe me if I were to tell you that Athelstan *could* not be implicated?’

‘My dear—believe you? Of course, I would believe if I could. Unfortunately, the evidence is too strong.’

Elsie sighed. ‘Very well; I will say nothing more. You have driven out my lover, as you drove out my brother for the self-same cause, and on the self-same charge. I follow my lover and my brother.’

‘Elsie!’—her mother started. ‘Do not, I pray you, do anything rash. Remember—a scandal—a whisper even—may be fatal to

you hereafter. Sit down and wait. All I ask you to do is to wait.'

'No; I will not wait. If those two are under any cloud of suspicion, I too will sit under the cloud and wait until it lifts. I am going to stay with my brother until my wedding. That is to be on the 12th.'

'No—no—my poor child. There will be no wedding on the 12th.'

'Before that time, everything will be cleared up, and I shall be married from this house, so that I have left all my things, my presents—everything.'

Her mother shook her head.

'Try not to think so cruelly of George and of Athelstan, mother. You will be sorry afterwards. Try to believe that though a case may look strange, there may be a way out.'

'I have told you'—her mother was perfectly cold and unmoved—'that I have come to this conclusion on the evidence. If the young man can explain things, let him do so.'

There will be no wedding on the 12th, Elsie. You can come home as soon as you are convinced that your brother is an improper person for a young lady to live with, and as soon as you have learned the truth about the other young man. That is to say, I will receive you under these distressing circumstances, provided there has been no scandal connected with your name.'

Elsie turned and left the room. The fifth commandment enjoins that under such circumstances as these the least said the soonest mended.

When a man learns that his sister, his favourite sister, from whom he has been parted for eight years, the only member of his family who stood up for him when he was falsely accused of a disgraceful thing, is about to take breakfast with him, he naturally puts as much poetry into that usually simple meal as circumstances allow. Mostly Athelstan took a cup of coffee and a London egg. This morning he had flowers, raspberries lying in

a bed of leaves, a few late strawberries various kinds of confitures in dainty dishes, toast and cake, with fish and cutlets—quite a little feast. And he had had the room cleared of the bundles of newspapers; the pipes and cigar-cases and all the circumstances of tobacco were hidden away—all but the smell, which lingered. One thinks a good deal about a sister's visit, under such conditions. At a quarter past nine Elsie arrived. Athelstan hastened to open the door, and to receive her with open arms and kisses strange and sweet. Then, while the people of the house took in her luggage, he led his sister into the room, which was the front room on the ground-floor.

‘Elsie!’ he said, taking both her hands in his, ‘eight years since we parted—and you are a tall young lady whom I left a little girl. To hold your hand—to kiss you, seems strange after so long.’ He kissed her again on the forehead. She looked up at the tall handsome man with a kind of terror. It was almost like

casting herself upon the care of a strange man.

‘I remember your voice, Athelstan, but not your face. You have changed more than I, even.’

‘And I remember your voice, Elsie—always a soft and winning voice, wasn’t it?—to suit soft and winning ways. There never was any child more winning and affectionate than you—never.’

‘Oh! you are grown very handsome, Athelstan. See what a splendid beard, and the brown velvet jacket, and white waistcoat—and the crimson tie. You look like an artist. I wish all men wore colours, as they used to do. I only heard yesterday that you were in London. Hilda told me.’

‘Was that the reason why you cannot stay at home?’

‘Part of the reason. But you shall have breakfast first. You can take me in without any trouble?’

‘My dear child, I am more than delighted

to have you here. There is a room at the back where you will be quiet : we have only this one room for sitting-room, and I think we shall find it best to go out every day to dinner. That will not hurt us, and George will come every evening.—Now, Elsie, you sit here, and I will—— No—I quite forgot. You will pour out the tea. Yes—I see. I thought I was going to wait upon you altogether.—There—now you will make a good breakfast, and—and—— Don't cry, dear child.'

'No—Athelstan.' She brushed away the tears. 'It is nothing. I shall be very happy with you. But why are you not at home? And why am I here? Oh! it is too cruel—too perverse of them!'

'We had better have it out before breakfast, then.—Strawberries don't go well with tears, do they? Nor jam with complainings. Come, Elsie, why need you leave home?'

'Because, in two words, they are treating George as they treated you. I was younger then, or I would have gone away with you.'

‘Treating George? Oh! I understand. They are pouring suspicion upon him. Well, I saw that this was coming. Old Checkley, I swear, is at the bottom of this.’

‘Yes—Checkley went to Sir Samuel with the “Case,” as he called it, complete. He has proved to their joint satisfaction that nobody could have done the thing except George, assisted by you.’

‘Oh! assisted by me.’

‘Yes—while you were in California, I suppose. There is to be a warrant for your arrest—yours and George’s—in a few days, they say. Hilda brought the news to my mother. They both believe it, and they want me to break off my engagement. My mother refuses to see George so long as this charge, as she calls it, remains over him. So I came away.’

‘You did wisely. Well—any one may call up a cloud of suspicion, and it is sometimes difficult to disperse such a cloud. Therefore, we must do everything we can to find out who

is the real criminal.—Now, let us rest quite easy. There can be no arrest—or any charge—or anything but a fuss created by this old villain. It is only troublesome to find one's own people so ready to believe.'

'Why did you not tell me that you were home again?'

'Pour out the coffee, Elsie, and begin your breakfast. I wanted to reserve the Return of the Prodigal until you came home after your honeymoon. Then I meant to call mysteriously about sunset, before George was home. I thought I would have a long cloak wrapped about me. I should have begun: "Madam: you had once a brother."—"I had"—that is you.—"On his deathbed."—"My brother dead?"—that's you.—"With this packet."—Oh! we have lost a most beautiful little play. How can I forgive you?'

Then they went on with breakfast, talking and laughing until, before the meal was finished, they had lost their shyness and were brother and sister again.

After breakfast, Athelstan took a cigarette and an easy-chair. 'Now I am going to devote the whole day to you. I have nothing to do for my paper which cannot wait till to-morrow. All this morning we will talk—that is, until we are tired. We will have lunch somewhere, and go to see the pictures; George will come at about seven: we will have dinner, and go to some exhibition, somewhere. Then we will get home, and have another talk. To-morrow, I shall have to leave you to your own devices between ten and six or so. I am very busy some days: on others, I can find time for anything.—Now that's all cleared up. I am to be your banker and everything.'

'Not my banker, Athelstan. Oh! you don't know. I am a great heiress.'

'Indeed? How is that?' he asked, a little twinkle in his eye.

'Mr. Dering told me when I was twenty-one, three weeks ago. Somebody has given me an immense sum of money—thirteen thousand pounds.'

‘That is a very handsome sum. Who gave it to you?’

‘That is a secret. Mr. Dering refuses to tell me. I wish I knew.’

‘I wouldn’t wish if I were you. Gratitude is at all times a burden and a worry. Besides, he might be a vulgar person without aspirates or aspirations. Much better not inquire after him. Thirteen thousand pounds at three and a half per cent. means four hundred and fifty pounds a year. A nice little addition to your income. I congratulate you, Elsie; and this evening we will drink the health of the unassuming benefactor; the retiring and nameless recogniser of maidenly worth. Bless him!’

‘And now, Athelstan, begin your adventures. Tell me everything: from the day you left us till now. You cannot tell me too much or talk too long. Before you begin, ask any questions about my mother and Hilda that you want to ask. Then we can go on undisturbed.’

‘I have no questions to ask about either. I have already ascertained from George that both are in good health, and that Hilda has married a man with an immense fortune. That is happiness enough for her, I hope.—Now, Elsie, I shall be tedious, I am afraid ; but you shall hear everything.’

He began. It was such a narrative as thousands of young Englishmen have been able to tell during the last five-and-twenty years. The story of the young man with a few pounds in his pocket, no friends, no recommendations, and no trade. Athelstan landed at New York in this condition. He looked about for employment and found none. He hastened out of the crowded city : he went West, and got work in the business open to every sharp and clever man—that of journalism. He worked for one paper after another, getting gradually more and more West, until he found himself in San Francisco, where he was taken on by a great paper, which had

now sent him over here as its London correspondent. That was all the story; but there were so many episodes in it, so many adventures, so many men whom he remembered, so many anecdotes cropping up, in this eight years' history of a man with an eye, a brain, and a memory, that it was long past luncheon-time when Athelstan stopped and said that he must carry on the next chapter at another time.

‘That pile of dollars that you made over the silver mine, Athelstan—what became of them?’

‘What became of them? Well, you see, Elsie, in some parts of the United States money vanishes as fast as it is made. All these dollars dropped into a deep hole of the earth, and were hopelessly lost.’

She laughed. ‘You will tell me some day—when you please—how you lost that fortune. Oh! what a thing it is to be a man and to have all these adventures!—Now, Athelstan, consider—if it had not been for

your bad fortune, you would never have had all this good fortune.'

'True. Yet the bad fortune came in such an ugly shape. There has been a black side to my history. How was I to tell people why I left my own country? I could make no friends. At the first appearance of friendship, I had to become cold, lest they should ask me where I came from and why I left home.'

Elsie was silent.

They carried out part of their programme. They went to see the pictures—it was eight years since Athelstan had seen a picture—and after the pictures they walked in the Park. Then they went home and waited for George, who presently appeared. Then they went to one of the Regent Street restaurants and made a little feast. After this, Elsie asked them to come home and spend a quiet evening talking about things.

By common consent they avoided one topic. Edmund Gray was not so much as mentioned, nor was the malignity of Checkley alluded to.

They talked of old days, when Athelstan was a big boy and George a little boy and Elsie a child. They talked of the long engagement, and the hopeless time, when it seemed as if they were going to marry on two hundred pounds a year : and of that day of miracle and marvel when Mr. Dering gave to one of them a fortune, and to the other a partnership. They talked of their honeymoon and the tour they were going to make, and the beautiful places they would see. Tours and Blois, Chenonceaux and Amboise ; Angoulême and Poitiers and La Rochelle ; and of their return, and the lovely flat, where the friends would be made so welcome. Athelstan was a person of some sympathy. Elsie talked as freely to him as she could to George. They talked till midnight.

Then Elsie got up. ‘Whatever happens, Athelstan,’ she said, ‘mind—whatever happens, you shall give me away on the 12th.’

‘Now she has left us,’ said George, ‘you

may tell me why she refused to stay at home.'

'Well—I suppose you ought to know. Much for the same reason that I refused to stay at home. They then chose to jump at the conclusion that at one step I had become, from a man of honour, a stupid and clumsy forger. They now choose—I am ashamed to say—my mother and sister choose—to believe that you and I together have devised and invented this elaborate scheme of forgery. With this end in view, it has been found necessary to contrive certain little fabrications—as that I have been living in London on my wits—that is to say, by the exercise of cheatery—for the last eight years; and that, being in rags and penniless, I persuaded you to join me in this neat little buccaneering job.'

'Oh! it is too absurd! But I suspected something. Well—it is perfectly easy to put a stop to that.'

'Yes, it is easy. At the same time, it will

be well to put a stop to it as soon as possible, before the thing assumes serious proportions, and becomes a horrid thing, that may stick to you all your life. You have got to do with a malignant man—perhaps a desperate man. He will spread abroad the suspicion as diligently as he can. Let us work, therefore.’

‘Well—but what can we do, that we have not done? How can we fix the thing upon Checkley?’

‘I don’t know. We must think—we must find out something, somehow. Let us all three work together. Elsie will make the best detective in the world. And let us work in secret. I am very glad—very glad indeed—that Elsie came.’

CHAPTER XIX

THE WHISPER OF CALUMNY

WHISPERED words are ever more potent than words proclaimed aloud upon the house-top. If the envious man from the house-top denounces a man of reputation as a thief, a gambler, a patricide, a sororicide, amicocide, no man regardeth his voice, though he call out with the voice of Stentor : people only stare : these are the words of a madman or malignant. But whisper these charges in the ear of your neighbour : whisper them with bated breath : say that, as yet, the thing is a profound secret. Then that rumour swiftly flies abroad, until every burgess in the town regards that man askance ; and when the time for voting comes, he votes for another man,

and will not have him as beadle, sexton, vergers, schoolmaster, turncock, policeman, parish doctor, workhouse chaplain, common-councilman, alderman, Mayor, or Member of Parliament. And all for a whisper.

It was Checkley who set going the whisper, which at this moment was running up and down the office, agitating all hearts, occupying all minds, the basis of all conversation.

King Midas's servant, when he was irresistibly impelled to whisper, dug a hole in the ground and placed his whisper at the bottom of that hole. But the grasses grew up and sighed the words to the passing breeze, so that the market women heard them on their way: 'The King's ears are the ears of an Ass—the ears of an Ass—the ears of an Ass.' The old and trusty servant of Dering and Son buried his secret in the leaves of his Copying-book. Here it was found by the boy who worked the Copying-press. As he turned over the pages, he became conscious of a sibilant, malignant, revengeful murmur: 'Who stole the bonds?

The new Partner.—Who forged the letters? The new Partner.—Who robbed the safe? The new Partner.’ Here was a pretty thing for a pretty innocent office boy to hear! Naturally, his very soul became aflame: when the dinner hour arrived, he told another boy as a profound secret what he had heard. That boy told an older boy, who told another still older, who told another, and so up the long official ladder, until everybody in the place knew that the new Partner—actually the new Partner—the most fortunate of all young men that ever passed his Exam.—who had stepped at a bound from two hundred to a thousand, at least—this young man, of all young men in the world, had forged his partner’s name, robbed his partner’s safe, made away with his partner’s property. Who after this can trust anybody?

But others there were who refused to believe this thing. They pointed out that the new Partner continued—apparently—on the best of terms with the old Partner: they

argued that when such things are done, friendships are killed and partnerships are dissolved. They even went so far, though members of the great profession which believes in no man's goodness, as to declare their belief that the new Partner could not possibly by any temptation do such things. And there were others who pointed to the fact that the whisper came from the boy of the Copying-press: that he heard it whispered by the fluttering leaves: and that it was imparted to those leaves by Checkley—old Checkley—whose hatred towards the new Partner was notorious to all men: not on account of any personal qualities or private injuries, but out of the jealousy which made him regard the Chief as his own property: and because he had been deprived of his power in the office—the power of appointment and disappointment and the raising of screw, which he had previously possessed. Checkley was dethroned. Therefore, Checkley spread this rumour. Others, again, said that if the rumour was really started by Checkley,

which could not be proved, seeing that, like all whispers or rumours, the origin was unknown, and perhaps supernatural, then Checkley must have very strong grounds for starting such a thing.

Thus divided in opinion, the office looked on, expectant. Expectancy is a thing which gets into the air: it fills every room with whispers: it makes a conspirator or a partisan or a confederate of every one: it divides a peaceful office into camps: it is the cause of inventions, lies, and exaggerations. There were two parties in this office—one which whispered accusations, and the other which whispered denials. Between these hovered the wobblers or mugwumps, who whispered that while on the one hand—on the other hand—and that while they readily admitted—so they were free to confess—— Everybody knows the wobbler. He is really, if he knew it, the master of the situation; but, because he is a wobbler, he cannot use his strength. When he is called upon to act, he

falls into two pieces, each of which begins to wobble and to fall into other two pieces of its own accord. The whole process of a Presidential Election—except the final voting—was going on in that office of half-a-dozen rooms, but in whispers, without a single procession, and not one German band. And all unconscious of the tumult that raged about him—a tumult in whispers—a civil war in silence—the object of this was going on his way unconscious and undisturbed.

Now, however, having learned that the old clerk was actually seeking to fix this charge upon him, George perceived the whispering and understood the charge. When he passed through the first or outer office in the morning, he perceived that the clerks all looked at him curiously, and that they pretended not to be looking at him, and plied their pens with zeal. On the stairs he met an articulated clerk, who blushed a rosy red with consciousness of the thing : on his way to his own room through his own clerks' room, he felt them looking

after him curiously as he passed ; and he felt them, when his own door was closed, whispering about him. This made him extremely angry. Yet, for a whisper, one cannot suffer wrath to become visible. That would only please the whisperers. There is only one thing worse than to be suspected rightly : it is to be suspected wrongly ; for the latter makes a man mad. What ? That he—even he—the man of principle and rule, should be suspected ! Does nothing, then—no amount of character, no blamelessness of record, avail ? Is the world coming to an end ?

George then shut his door and sat down to his table in a very wrathful and savage frame of mind. And while he was just beginning to nurse and nourish this wrath, coaxing it from a red glow to a roaring flame, a card was brought to him.

‘ I will see Sir Samuel at once,’ he said.

It is as well that we do not hear the remarks of the clerks’ room and the servants’ hall. The Service, in fact, is a body of critics

whose judgments would, if we only heard them, cause us to reconsider our self-respect. Great Philanthropist, great Statesman, saintly Preacher—if you only knew what they say of you—down below !

The clerks, as Sir Samuel Dering—his face composed to the solemnity of a mute—walked into the new Partner's room, whispered to each other : 'He's going to finish him. There'll be a bolt to-night.—He won't dare face it out.—He *have* got a nerve!!!—The game's up at last.—They won't prosecute ; you see if they do. If it was one of us, now.—Sir Samuel's come to warn him—now you'll see.' With other exchanges and surmises.

Sir Samuel, big and important, coldly inclined his head and took a chair. 'A few words,' he said—'a few serious words, if you please, sir.'

'Pray, go on.' George sat up and listened, his upper lip stiffened. He knew what was coming. The thing which Sir Samuel proposed to say, apparently became difficult. He

turned red and stammered. In fact, it is very difficult to inform a highly respectable young man in a highly respectable position that he is going to be charged with a crime of peculiar atrocity.

‘I am here,’ he said, after two or three false starts, ‘without my brother’s knowledge. This is a private and unofficial visit. I come to advise. My visit must be regarded as without prejudice.’

‘Is it not well to ask first of all if your advice is invited?’

‘In such a case as this, I venture to obtrude advice,’ Sir Samuel replied with dignity. ‘There are occasions on which a man should speak—he is bound to speak. You will remember that I was to have been your brother-in-law’——

‘You are to be my brother-in-law. Well, Sir Samuel, go on. I will hear what you have to say.’

‘You are, as no doubt you suspect and fear, about to be charged in company with

another, with complicity in this long series of forgeries.'

'Really? I heard last night from Elsie that there was some talk of such a charge. Now, Sir Samuel, a man of your experience must be aware that it is not enough for a foolish old clerk to suggest a charge; but there must be some connection between the accused person and the crime.'

'Connection? Good Heavens! There is a solid chain of evidence, without a single weak point.'

'Is there indeed? Well, we will not ask for the production of your chain. Let us take it for granted. Go on to the next point.'

'I wish, young gentleman, I wish most sincerely, for the credit of yourself, and for the happiness of the unfortunate girl who has given you her heart, that my chain was of glass, to fly into a thousand fragments. But it is not. Everything is complete. The motive: the tempter: the conspiracy: the working out: the apparent success—every-

thing complete. The motive—want of money.'

'Want of money? Well, I was pretty badly off. That cannot be denied. Go on.'

'You wanted money—both of you—wanted money. In ninety cases out of a hundred, this is the cause—wanted money. So you went and did it. Always the way in the City—they want money—and so they go and do it—go and do it.'

'I see. Well, we need not have the tempter and the rest of it. They can wait. Let us go on to the advice.'

'Just so. What I came to say is this. You are in a devil of a mess, young gentleman: the whole job is found out: there's no use in trying to brazen it out. Best come down at once.'

George nodded with as much good-humour as he could assume under the circumstances.

'Down at once,' Sir Samuel repeated. 'It is always best in the long run. In your case, there is every reason why a scandal should be

avoided. The thing hasn't got into the papers: we are only yet in the first stage of finding out what has been actually stolen: it has not been a case in which the police could help. Now my brother is not a vindictive man. I, for my own part, don't want my wife's brother, to say nothing of you, convicted of forgery. Eh? Beastly thing, to go down to the City in the morning and to hear them whispering, "That's his wife's brother in the papers to-day. Lagged for fifteen years." Fifteen years for certain, it will be, my fine fellow.'

'Fifteen years for certain,' George repeated.

'Let me help you out of the mess. Don't make difficulties. Don't stick out your chin. Think of Elsie!'

George nearly lost his self-control—not quite.

'Think of Elsie!' he cried. 'Best not mention her name, Sir Samuel, if you please.'

'She would be heart-broken if it went so

far. If it stops short of that, she will soon get over the little disappointment.'

'Go on to the next point.'

'Well—it is just this. I'll help you both—Athelstan as well as you—yes—I'll help Athelstan. Hang the fellow! Why couldn't he stay at Camberwell? Who cares about him and his bad company, if he keeps himself out of people's way? Now, then. Let me have back the money. You haven't drawn anything out of the Bank. Give me the papers. Then I'll square it with my brother. I will advance you a hundred or two: you shall go clear out of the country, and never come back again. And then, though it's compounding a felony, we'll just put everything back again, and say nothing more about it.'

'Oh! That is very good of you.'

'Yes, I know. But I want to make things easy. I don't want a beastly row and a scandal. As for Athelstan, I shouldn't know the fellow if I ever saw him. I hardly remember him. But for you I've always

had a liking, until these little events happened.'

'Very good, indeed, of you.'

'When the thing came out, I said to Lady Dering. "My dear," I said, "I'm very sorry for your sister, because it will vex her more than a bit. The engagement, of course, will be broken off; but we must not have a scandal. We cannot afford it. We can not"—he smiled—"we are positively not rich enough. Only the very richest people can afford to have such a scandal. I will try and get things squared," I said, "for all our sakes." That is what I said to Lady Dering. Now, be persuaded. Do the right thing. Tell Athelstan what I have told you. The warrant for the arrest of the man Edmund Gray will be issued to-morrow, I suppose, or next day. After that, nothing can save you.'

'Nothing can save me,' George repeated. 'Is that all you came to say, Sir Samuel?'

'That is all. A clean breast is all we ask.'

‘Then, Sir Samuel’—George rose and took a bundle of papers from the table—‘let us find my Partner. You shall hear what I have to say.’

‘Ah ! that’s right—that’s sensible. I knew that you would be open to reason. Come. He is sure to be alone at this early hour. Come at once.’

They went out together. The clerks noticed their faces full of ‘business,’ as we poetically put it—matters of buying and selling being notoriously of the highest importance conceivable. Evidently something very serious indeed had passed. But the chief personage still held up his head. ‘Game, sir, game to the last. But there will be a bolt.’

Mr. Dering was in his usual place, before the letters, which were still unopened. He looked ill, worn, and worried.

‘Brother,’ said Sir Samuel, ‘I bring you a young gentleman who has a communication to make of great importance.’

‘Is it about this case? Have you—at last

found out something?' The tone, the words, suggested extreme irritability.

'I fear not. You know, I believe, all that we have found out. But now,' said Sir Samuel, rubbing his hands—'now comes the long-expected'——

George interrupted—'What I have to say will not take long. I hear from Sir Samuel that he and Checkley between them have got up a case which involves me in these forgeries.'

'Quite right,' said Sir Samuel. 'Involves you inextricably.'

'And that things have gone so far that I am about to be arrested, tried, and convicted. Which he rightly thinks will be a great scandal. So it will—so it certainly will. He therefore proposes that I should make a clean breast of the whole business, and give back the stolen bonds. I am sorry that I cannot do this, for a very simple reason—namely, that there is nothing to confess. But there is one thing that I must do. You placed the case in my hands'——

‘I did. I asked you to find out. I have brought no charge against you. Have you found out?’

Mr. Dering spoke like a schoolmaster in one of his least amiable moods.

‘It is a very improper thing for a person accused of a crime to be engaged in detecting it. So I resign the case—there are the papers. You had better go to some solicitor accustomed to this kind of work.’

‘Stuff and rubbish!’ cried Mr. Dering.

‘Sir, you have deceived me.’ Sir Samuel’s face was gradually resuming its normal length. ‘You promised to confess, and you have not. You as good as confessed just now.—This man is clearly, unmistakably guilty,’ he added, turning to his brother.

‘I have not asked you, my Partner,’ Mr. Dering added, more softly, ‘to give up the case. I have heard what is said. I have observed that the so-called case is built up entirely on conjecture.’

‘No—no,’ said Sir Samuel. ‘It is a sound structure, complete in every part.’

‘And there is nothing as yet to connect any man with the thing—not even the man Edmund Gray.’

‘Quite wrong—quite wrong,’ said Sir Samuel. ‘In the City, we may not be lawyers, but we understand evidence.’

‘I cannot choose but give up the case,’ George replied. ‘Consider. Already Mrs. Arundel has requested her daughter to break off her engagement; I am forbidden the house; Elsie has left her mother and gone to her brother. No, sir—take the papers, and give them to some other person.’

Mr. Dering mechanically took the papers, and laid his hand upon them.

‘Let me remind you,’ George continued, ‘how far we have got. We have proved that Edmund Gray is a real person, known to many. We have not proved the connection between him and the robberies committed in his name. He is apparently a most respect-

able person. The problem before you is still to fix the crime on someone. I shall be glad to hear that it has been successfully solved.'

'Glad?' asked Sir Samuel. 'You will be glad? This is amazing!'

'Eight years ago, Mr. Dering, another man stood here, and was accused of a similar crime. He refused to stay in the house under such a charge. That was foolish. Time has established his innocence. I shall stay. I am your Partner. The Partnership can only be dissolved by mutual consent. I remain.'

Mr. Dering laid his head upon his hand and sighed. 'I believe I shall be driven mad before long with this business,' he said querulously. He had lost something of his decision of speech. 'Well, I will give the case to somebody else. Meantime, look here. Tell me how these things came here.'

The 'things' were two envelopes containing letters. They were addressed to Edmund Gray, and had been opened. One of them was George's own note inviting him to call.

The other was the letter from the Manager of the Bank asking for other references.

‘How did they get here?’ asked Mr. Dering again.

‘Had you not better ask Checkley?’ George rang the bell.

‘I found these on the top of my letters, Checkley,’ said Mr. Dering. ‘You were the first in the room. You put the letters on the table. I found them on the top of the heap. Nobody had been in the room except you and me. You must have put them there.’

Checkley looked at the envelopes, and began to tremble. ‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘I put the letters on the table. They were not among them. Somebody must have put them there’—he looked at the new Partner—‘some friend of Mr. Edmund Gray, between the time that I left the room and the time when you came.’

‘I entered the room,’ Mr. Dering replied, ‘as you were leaving it.’

‘Observe,’ said George, ‘that in the whole

conduct of this business there has been one man engaged who has control of the letters. That man—the only man in the office—is, I believe, the man before us—your clerk—Checkley.’

‘How came the letters here?’ Mr. Dering repeated angrily.

‘I don’t know,’ answered Checkley. ‘He’—indicating George—‘must have put them there.’

‘The Devil is in the office, I believe. How do things come here? How do they vanish? Who put the notes in the safe? Who took the certificates out of the safe? All you can do is to stand and accuse each other. What good are you—any of you? Find out. Find out. Yesterday, there was a handbill about Edmund Gray in the safe. The day before there was a handful of Socialist tracts on the letters. Find out, I say.’

‘Give the thing to detectives,’ said George.

‘Let me take the case in hand, brother.’ Sir Samuel laid hands on the papers. ‘I

flatter myself that I will very soon have the fellow under lock and key. And then, sir'—he turned to George—'scandal or no scandal, there shall be no pity—no mercy—none.'

George laughed. 'Well, Sir Samuel, in a fortnight or so I shall call myself your brother-in-law. Till then, farewell.' He left the office and returned to his own room, the ripple of the laughter still upon his lips and in his eyes, so that the clerks marvelled, and the faith of those who believed in him was strengthened.

'Before then, young crowing bantam,' cried Sir Samuel after him, 'I shall have you under lock and key.'

'Ah!' This was Checkley. The little interjection expressed, far more than any words could do, his satisfaction at the prospect. Then he left the room grumbling and muttering.

'I believe that this business will finish me off.' Mr. Dering sighed again, and passed his hand over his forehead. 'Night and day it worries me. It makes my forgetfulness grow

upon me. I am as good as gone. This hour I cannot remember the last hour. See—I had breakfast at home as usual. I remember that. I remember setting out. It is ten minutes walk from Bedford Row to here. I have taken an hour and a half. How? I do not know. What did I do last night? I do not know; and I am pursued by this forger—robber—demon. He puts things in my safe—yesterday, a placard that Edmund Gray was going to give a lecture on something or other—the day before, a bundle of tracts by Edmund Gray. What do these things mean? What can I do?’

CHAPTER XX

HE COMES FROM EDMUND GRAY

‘NOTHING,’ said Athelstan, ‘could possibly happen more fortunately. We have turned whispering conspirators into declared enemies. Now you are free to investigate in your own way without having to report progress every day.’

‘About this new business about the letters and the things in the safe,’ said Elsie. ‘It looks to me like *diablerie*. Checkley couldn’t do it. No conjurer in the world could do it. There must be somebody else in the office to do these things. They mean defiance. The forger says: “See—I do what I please with you. I return your letters addressed to Edmund Gray. I place placards about

Edmund Gray in your safe—for which nobody has a key except yourself. Find me, if you can.”’

‘Yes; it is very mysterious.’

‘A Person on Two Sticks might manage it. Very likely, he is concerned in the business. Or a boy under the table would be able to do it. Perhaps there is a boy under the table. There must be. Mr. Dering’s table is like the big bed of Ware. I daresay fifty boys might creep under that table and wait there for a chance. But perhaps there is only one—a comic boy.’

‘I should like to catch the joker,’ said George. ‘I would give him something still more humorous to laugh at.’

‘If there is no comic boy—and no Person on Two Sticks,’ Elsie continued, ‘we are thrown back upon Checkley. He seems to be the only man who receives the letters and goes in and out of the office all day. Well—I don’t think it is Checkley. I don’t think it can be— George, you once saw Mr. Dering in

a very strange condition, unconscious, walking about with open eyes seeing nobody. Don't you think that he may have done this more than once?'

'What do you mean, Elsie?'

'Don't you think that some of these things—things put in the safe, for instance, may have been put there by Mr. Dering himself? You saw him open the safe. Afterwards he knew nothing about it. Could he not do this more than once—might it be a habit?'

'Well—but if he puts the things in the safe—things that belonged to Edmund Gray, he must know Edmund Gray. For instance, how did he get my note to Edmund Gray, left by me on his table in Gray's Inn? That must have been given to him by Edmund Gray himself.'

'Or by some friend of Edmund Gray. Yes; that is quite certain.'

'Come,' said Athelstan. 'This infernal Edmund Gray is too much with us. Let us leave off talking about him for a while. Let

him rest for this evening.—Elsie, put on your things. We will go and dine somewhere, and go to the play afterwards.'

They did so. They had the quiet little restaurant dinner that girls have learned of late to love so much—the little dinner, where everything seems so much brighter and better served than one can get at home. After the dinner they went to a theatre, taking places in the Dress Circle, where, given good eyes, one sees quite as well as from the stalls at half the money. After the theatre they went home and there was an exhibition of tobacco and soda water. Those were very pleasant days in the Piccadilly lodgings, even allowing for the troubles which brought them about. Athelstan was the most delightful of brothers, and every evening brought its feast of laughter and of delightful talk. But all through the evening, all through the play, Elsie saw nothing but Mr. Dering and him engaged in daylight somnambulism. She saw him as George described him, opening the safe, closing it again,

and afterwards wholly forgetful of what he had done.

She thought about this all night. Now, when one has a gleam or glimmer of an idea, when one wants to disengage a single thought from the myriads which cross the brain, and to fix it and to make it clear, there is nothing in the world so good as to talk about it. The effort of finding words with which to drag it out makes it clearer. Every story-teller knows that the mere telling of a story turns his characters, who before were mere shadows, and shapeless shadows, into creatures of flesh and blood. Therefore, in the morning she began upon the thought which haunted her.

‘Athelstan,’ she said, ‘do you know anything about somnambulism?’

‘I knew a man once in California who shot a grizzly when he was sleep-walking. At least, he said so. That’s the sum of my knowledge on the subject.’

‘I want to know if people often walk about in the daytime unconscious?’

‘They do. It is called wool-gathering.’

‘Seriously, Athelstan. Consider. George saw Mr. Dering arrive in a state of unconsciousness. He saw nobody in the room. He opened the safe and placed some papers there. Then he locked the safe. Then he sat down at the window. Presently he awoke, and became himself again. If he did that once, he might do it again.’

‘Well? And then?’

‘You heard yesterday about the letters, and the placard and the Socialist tracts. Now Checkley couldn’t do that. He couldn’t, and he wouldn’t.’

‘Well?’

‘But Mr. Dering could. If he had that attack once, he might have it again and again. Why, he constantly complains of forgetting things.’

‘But the letters yesterday were addressed to Edmund Gray. How do you connect Edmund Gray with Edward Dering?’

‘I don’t know. But, my dear brother,

the more I think of this business, the more persuaded I am that Checkley is not the prime mover, or even a confederate.'

'The same hand has doubtless been at work throughout. If not Checkley's aid to make that hand possible and successful, who is there? And look at the malignity with which he tries to fix it on some one else.'

'That may be because he is afraid of its being fixed upon him. Consider that point about the control of the letters. The business could only be done by some one through whose hands passed all the letters.'

'Checkley is the only person possible.'

'Yes; he understands that. It makes him horribly afraid. He therefore lies with all his might in order to pass on suspicion to another person. You and George think him guilty—well, I do not. If I were trying to find out the man, I should try a different plan altogether.'

Her brother had work to do which took him out directly after an early breakfast.

When Elsie was left alone, she began again to think about Mr. Dering's strange daylight somnambulism; about his continual fits of forgetfulness; about the odd things found on his table and in his safe, all connected with Edmund Gray. Checkley could not have placed those letters on the table: he could not have put those things in the safe.

Elsie looked at the clock. It was only just after nine. She ran to her room, put on her jacket and hat, and called a cab.

She arrived at half-past nine. Checkley was already in his master's room, laying out the table for the day's work as usual. The girl was touched at the sight of this old servant of sixty years' service doing these offices zealously and jealously. She stood in the outer office watching him through the open door. When he had finished, he came out and saw her.

'Oh!' he grumbled. 'It's you, is it? Well—he hasn't come. If you want to see Mr. Dering, it's full early. If you want to see

the new partner, he isn't come. He don't hurry himself. Perhaps you'll sit down a bit and look at the paper. Here's the *Times*. He'll be here at a quarter to ten.'

Checkley sat down at his desk and took up a pen. But he laid it down again and began to talk. 'We're in trouble, Miss. No fault of yours—I don't say it is. We're in trouble. The trouble is going to be worse before it's better. They're not content with robbing the master, but they mock at him and jeer him. They jeer him. They put on his table letters addressed to the man they call Edmund Gray. They open his safe and put things in it belonging to Edmund Gray. We're not so young as we was, and it tells upon us. We're not so regular as we should be. Sometimes we're late—and sometimes we seem, just for a bit, not to know exactly who we are nor what we are. Oh! it's nothing—nothing, but what will pass away when the trouble's over. But think of the black ingratitude, Miss—Oh! black—black. I'm not blamin' you; but I think you

ought to know the trouble we're in—considering who's done it and all.'

Elsie made no reply. She had nothing to say. Certainly she could not enter into a discussion with this man as to the part, if any, taken in the business by the new partner. Then Checkley made a show of beginning to write with zeal. The morning was hot: the place was quiet: the old man's hand gradually slackened: the pen stopped: the eyes closed: his head dropped back upon his chair: he was asleep. It is not uncommon for an old man to drop off in this way.

Elsie sat perfectly still. At eleven o'clock she heard a step upon the stairs. It mounted: it stopped: the private door was opened, and Mr. Dering entered. He stood for a moment in the doorway, looking about the room. Now, as the girl looked at him, she perceived that he was again in the condition described by George—as a matter of fact, it was in this condition that Mr. Dering generally arrived in the morning. His coat was unbuttoned: his

face wore the genial and benevolent look which we do not generally associate with lawyers of fifty years' standing: the eyes were Mr. Dering's eyes, but they were changed—not in colour or in form, but in expression. Elsie was reminded of her portrait. That imaginary sketch was no other than the Mr. Dering who now stood before her.

He closed the door behind him and walked across the room to the window.

Then Elsie, lightly, so as not to awaken the drowsy old clerk, stepped into Mr. Dering's office and shut the door softly behind her.

The sleep-walker stood at the window, looking out. Elsie crept up and stood beside him. Then she touched him on the arm. He started and turned. 'Young lady,' he said, 'what can I do for you?' He showed no sign of recognition at all in his eyes: he did not know her. 'Can I do anything for you?' he repeated.

'I am afraid—nothing,' she replied.

He looked at her doubtfully. Then appa-

rently remembering some duty as yet unfulfilled, he left the window and unlocked the safe. He then drew out of his pocket a manuscript tied up with red tape. Elsie looked into the safe and read the title—‘*The New Humanity*, by Edmund Gray,’ which was written in large letters on the outer page. Then he shut and locked the safe and dropped the key in his own pocket. This done, he returned to the window and sat down, taking no manner of notice of his visitor. All this exactly as he had done before in presence of George and his old clerk.

For ten minutes he sat there. Then he shivered, straightened himself, stood up, and looked about the room, Mr. Dering again.

‘Elsie!’ he cried. ‘I did not know you were here. How long have you been here?’

‘Not very long. A few minutes, perhaps.’

‘I must have fallen asleep. It is a hot morning. You must forgive the weakness of an old man, child. I had a bad night too. I was awake a long time, thinking of all these

troubles and worries. They can't find out, Elsie, who has robbed me.' He spoke querulously and helplessly. 'They accuse each other, instead of laying their heads together. Nonsense! Checkley couldn't do it. George couldn't do it. The thing was done by somebody else. My brother came here with a cock-and-bull case, all built up of presumptions and conclusions. If they would only find out!'

'The trouble is mine as much as yours, Mr. Dering. I have had to leave my mother's house, where I had to listen to agreeable prophecies about my lover and my brother. I wish, with you, that they would find out!'

He took off his hat and hung it on its peg. He buttoned his frock-coat and took his place at the table, upright and precise. Yet his eyes were anxious.

'They tease me too. They mock me. Yesterday, they laid two letters addressed to this man, Edmund Gray, on my letters. What

for? To laugh at me, to defy me to find them out. Checkley swears he didn't put them there. I arrived at the moment when he was leaving the room. Are we haunted? And the day before—and the day before that—there were things put in the safe'——

'In the safe? Oh! but nobody has the key except yourself. How can anything be put in the safe?'

'I don't know. I don't know anything. I don't know what may be taken next. My houses—my mortgages, my lands, my very practice'——

'Nay,—they could not. Is there anything this morning?'

He turned over his letters. 'Apparently not. Stay; I have not looked in the safe. He got up and threw open the safe. Then he took up a packet. 'Again!' he cried almost with a scream. 'Again! See this!' He tossed on the table the packet which he had himself, only ten minutes before, placed in the safe with his own hands. 'See this! Thus

they laugh at me—thus they torment me?’ He hurled the packet to the other side of the room, returned to his chair, and laid his head upon his hands, sighing deeply.

Elsie took up the parcel. It was rather a bulky manuscript. The title you have heard. She untied the tape and turned over the pages. The work, she saw, was the Autobiography of Edmund Gray. *And it was in the handwriting of Mr. Dering!*

She replaced it in the safe. ‘Put everything there,’ she said, ‘which is sent to you. Everything. Do you know anything at all about this man Edmund Gray?’

‘Nothing, my dear child, absolutely nothing. I never saw the man. I never heard of him. Yet he has planted himself upon me. He holds his Chambers on a letter of recommendation from me. I was his introducer to the manager of the Bank—I—in my own handwriting—as they thought. He drew a cheque of 720*l.* upon me eight years ago. And he has transferred thirty-eight thousand

pounds' worth of shares and stock to his own address.'

'Added to which, he has been the cause of suspicion and vile accusation against my lover and my brother, which it will cost a great deal of patience to forgive. Dear Mr. Dering, I am so sorry for you. It is most wonderful and most mysterious. Suppose,' she laid her hand upon his—'suppose that I was to find out for you'——

'You, child? What can you do, when the others have failed?'

'I can but try.'

'Try, in Heaven's name. Try, my dear. If you find out, you shall be burned for a witch.'

'No. If I find out, you shall be present at my wedding. You were to have given me away. But now—now—Athelstan shall give me away, and you will be there to see. And it will be a tearful wedding'—the tears came into her own eyes just to illustrate the remark—'because everyone will be so ashamed of the wicked things they have said. Sir Samuel

will remain on his knees the whole service, and Checkley will be fain to get under the seat.—Good-bye, Mr. Dering. I am a Prophetess. I can foretell. You shall hear in a very few days all about Edmund Gray.’

She ran away without any further explanation. Mr. Dering shook his head and smiled. He did not believe in contemporary Prophecy. That young people should place their own affairs—their love-makings and weddings—before the affairs of their elders, was not surprising. For himself, as he sometimes remembered—and always when this girl, with her pretty ways and soft voice, was with him—her visit had cheered him. He opened his letters and went on with the day’s work.

As for Elsie, the smile in her eyes died out as she descended the stairs. If she had been herself a lawyer, she could not have worn a graver face as she walked across the courts of the venerable Inn.

She had established the connection between Mr. Dering and Edmund Gray. It was he,

and nobody else, who laid those letters on the table—placed those things in the safe. This being so, it must be he himself, and nobody else, who wrote all the letters, signed the cheques, and did all the mischief. He himself! But how? Elsie had read of hypnotism. Wonderful things are done daily by mesmerists and magnetisms under their new name. Mr. Dering was hypnotised by this man Edmund Gray—as he called himself—for his own base ends. Well—she would find out this Edmund Gray. She would beard this villain in his own den.

She walked resolutely to Gray's Inn. She found No. 22—she mounted the stairs. The outer door was closed. She knocked, but there was no answer. She remembered how George had found his laundress, and visited her at her lodgings—she thought she would do the same. But on the stairs she went down she met an old woman so dirty, so ancient, so feeble, that she seemed to correspond with George's account of her.

‘You are Mr. Gray’s laundress?’ she asked.

‘Yes, Miss; I am.’ The woman looked astonished to see such a visitor.

‘I want to see him. I want to see him on very important business. Most important to himself. When can I see him?’

‘I don’t know, Miss. He is uncertain. He was here yesterday evening. He said he should not be here this evening. But I don’t know.’

‘Look here.’ Elsie drew out her purse. ‘Tell me when you think he will be here, and if I find him I will give you two pounds—two golden sovereigns. If you tell me right I will give you two sovereigns.’

She showed them. The old woman looked hungrily at the coins. ‘Well, Miss, he’s been here every Saturday afternoon for the last six months. I know it by the litter of papers that he makes. Every Saturday afternoon.’

‘Very good. You shall have your money if I find him.’

In the evening, Elsie said nothing about

Mr. Dering and her strange discovery. The two young men talked about trying this way and that way, always with the view of implicating Checkley. But she said nothing.

CHAPTER XXI

I AM EDMUND GRAY

ON Saturday afternoon, the policeman on day-duty at Gray's Inn was standing near the southern portals of that venerable Foundation in conversation with the boy who dispenses the newspapers, from a warehouse constructed in the eastern wall of the archway. It was half-past three by the clock and a fine day, which was remarkable for the season—August—and the year. The sun poured upon the dingy old courts, making them dingier instead of brighter. Where the paint of the windows and door-posts is faded and dirty—where the panes are mostly in want of cleaning—where there are no flowers in the windows—where there are no trees or leaves in the Square—

where the bricks want pointing, and where the soot has gathered in every chink and blackens every cranny—then the sunshine of summer only makes a dingy court shabbier. Gray's Inn in July and August, unless these months are as the August of the year of grace 1891, looks old, but not venerable. Age should be clean and nicely dressed : age should wear a front to conceal her baldness : age should assume false teeth to disguise those gums stripped of their ivory. It was felt by the policeman. 'We want a washin' and a brightenin' in this old place,' he remarked to the journalist. 'We want somethin' younger than them old laundresses,' said the newspaper boy. Great is the Goddess Coincidence. Even while he uttered this aspiration, a young lady entered the gate and passed into the Inn.

'Ha !' breathed the policeman, softly.

'Ah !' sighed the journalist.

She was a young lady of adorable face and form, surpassing the wildest dreams either of policeman or of paper-man—both of whom

possessed the true poetic temperament. She was clothed in raiment mystic, wonderful, such as seldom indeed gets as far east as Gray's Inn, something in gray or silver gray with an open front and a kind of jacket. She passed them rapidly, and walked through the passage into the Square.

'No. 22,' said the policeman. 'Now, who does she want at No. 22? Who's on the ground-floor of 22?'

'Right hand—Architects and Surveyors. Left hand—Universal Translators.'

'Perhaps she's a Universal Translator. They must be all gone by this time. The first floor is lawyers. They're all gone too. I saw the clerks march out at two o'clock. Second floor—there's Mr. Carstone on the left, and Mr. Edmund Gray on the right. Perhaps it's Mr. Carstone she's after. I hope it isn't him. He's a gentleman with fine manners, and they do say a great scholar, but he's a Lushington, and a sweet young thing like that ought not to marry a man who is brought

home every other night too tipsy to stand. Or there's Mr. Gray—the old gent—perhaps she's his daughter. What's Mr. Edmund Gray by calling, Joe?'

'Nobody knows. He don't often come. An old gentleman—been in the Inn a long time—for years. Lives in the country, I suppose, and does no work. Lives on other people's work—my work—honest working men's work,' said the boy, who was a Socialist and advanced.

'Ah! There's something up about Mr. Gray. People are coming to inquire for him. First, it was a young gentleman: very affable he was—and free with his money—most likely other people's money. He wanted to know a good deal about Mr. Gray—more than I could tell him—wanted to know how often he came, and what he was like when he did come—and would I tell him all I knew. He went to the old laundress afterwards.—Then it was a little old man—I know him by sight—uses the *Salutation Parlour* of an evening—he wanted

to know all about Mr. Gray too. No half-crown in that quarter, though. He's been spying and watching for him—goes and hides up the passage on the other side of the Square. Kind of a spider he is. He's watching him for no good, I'll bet. Perhaps the young lady wants to find out about him too.—Joe, there's something up at No. 22. The old gentleman isn't in his chambers, I believe. She'll come out again presently, and it'll be: "Oh, Mr. Policeman, could you very kindly tell me how I can find Mr. Edmund Gray?" With a shilling perhaps, and perhaps not. I wonder what she wants with Mr. Edmund Gray? Sometimes these old chaps break out in the most surprising manner. Joe, if you ever go into the Service, you'll find the work hard and the pay small. But there's compensation in learnin' things. If you want to know human nature, go into the Force.'

‘There's old Mr. Langhorne, up at the top.’

‘So there is. But no young lady wants to see that poor old chap. He's got no

friends, young nor old—no friends and no money. Just now, he's terrible hard up. Took a shillin' off o' me last Sunday to get a bit of dinner with. Fine thing—isn't it, Joe?—to be a gentleman and a barrister all your life, isn't it—and to end like that? Starvation in a garret—eh?—Look out. She will be coming down directly.'

But she did not come down. Two hours and more passed, and she did not come down.

The visitor was Elsie Arundel. She walked up the stairs to the second floor. Here she stopped. There was a black door, closed, on the right of her, and another black door, closed, on the left of her. On the lintel of one was the name of Mr. F. W. Carstone. On the lintel of the other was that of Mr. Edmund Gray. Elsie knocked with her parasol at the latter door. There was no reply. 'The old laundress,' she murmured, 'told me that Saturday afternoon was my best chance of finding him. I will wait.' She sat down with hesitation on the stairs

leading to the third floor—they were not too clean—and waited.

She was going to do a very plucky thing—a dangerous thing. She had made a discovery connecting Mr. Dering directly with this Edmund Gray. She had learned that he came to the office in a strange condition, perhaps hypnotic, bringing things from Edmund Gray. She now suspected that the only person who carried on the forgeries on Mr. Dering was Mr. Dering himself, acted on and perhaps mesmerised by Edmund Gray—and she wanted to find out who this Edmund Gray was. She would confront him and tax him with the crime. It was dangerous, but he could not kill her. Besides, he was described as quite an elderly man. He was also described as a benevolent man, a charitable man, a kindly man : and he wrote letters brimful of the most cheerful optimism. Yet he was carrying on a series of complicated forgeries. She resolved to wait for him. She would wait till sundown, if necessary, for him.

The place was very quiet. All the offices were closed and the clerks gone. Most of the men who lived in the chambers were away, out of town, gone on holiday, gone away from Saturday till Monday. Everything was quite quiet and still: the traffic in Holborn was only heard as a continuous murmur which formed part of the stillness: the policeman, who had now said all he had to say to the newspaper boy, was walking slowly and with heavy tread round the Court. The Inn was quite empty and deserted and still. Only, overhead there was the footfall of a man who walked up and down his room steadily, never stopping or ceasing or changing the time, like the beat of a pendulum. Elsie began to wonder, presently, who this man could be, and if he had nothing better to do than to pace his chamber all day long, when the sun was bright and the leaves on the trees and the flowers in full bloom?

The clock struck four: Elsie had been waiting half an hour: still Mr. Edmund Gray

did not arrive: still the steady beat of the footstep continued overhead.

The clock struck five. Still that steady footfall. Still Elsie sat upon the stairs waiting in patience.

When the clock struck six, the footsteps stopped—or changed. Then a door overhead opened and shut and the steps came down the stairs. Elsie rose and stood on one side. An old man came down—tall and thin, close-shaven, pale, dressed in a black frock-coat, worn to a shiny polish in all those parts which take a polish—a shabby old man whose hat seemed hardly able to stand upright: and a gentleman—which was perfectly clear from his bearing—a gentleman in the last stage of poverty and decay.

He started, surprised to see a young lady on the stairs.

‘You are waiting for Mr. Carstone?’ he asked. ‘He is out of town. He will not be back till Monday. Nobody ever comes back before Monday. From Saturday to Monday

I have the Inn to myself. All that time there are no slammers and no strangers. It is an agreeable retreat, if only'—— He shook his head and stopped short.

'I am not waiting for Mr. Carstone. I am waiting for Mr. Edmund Gray.'

'He is very uncertain. No one knows when he comes or whither he goeth. I would not wait if I were you. He may come to-day, or to-morrow, or at any time. He comes on Sunday morning, often. I hear him coming up-stairs after the chapel bell stops. He is a quiet neighbour—no slammer or tramper. I would not wait, I say, if I were you.'

'I will wait a little longer. I am very anxious to see Mr. Gray.'

'He should wait for you,' Mr. Langhorne replied, politely. 'The stairs are not a fit resting-place for you. This old Inn is too quiet for such as you. Mirth and joy belong to you—Silence and rest to such as me. Even slamming does not, I daresay, greatly displease youth and beauty. Chambers are

not for young ladies. Beauty looks for life and love and admiration. They do not exist here. Run away, young lady—leave the Inn to the poor old men, like me, who cannot get away if they would.’

‘Thank you.—I must see Mr. Edmund Gray, if I can. It will not hurt me to wait a little longer.’

‘You wish to see Edmund Gray. So do I. So do I. You are a friend of his. Perhaps, therefore, you will do as well. Those who are his friends are like unto him for kindness of heart. Those who wish to be his friends must try to be like unto him. Young lady, I will treat you as the friend of that good man. You can act for him.’

‘What can I do if I do act for him?’ But there was a hungry eagerness in the man’s eyes which made her divine what she could do.

‘It is Saturday.’ He replied without looking at her. He turned away his head.

He spoke to the stair-window. ‘To-morrow is Sunday. I have before this, on one or two occasions, found myself as I do now—without money. I have borrowed of Mr. Carstone and of Mr. Edmund Gray. Sometimes, I have paid it back—not always. Lend me—for Mr. Edmund Gray—if you are not rich, he will give it back to you—the sum of five shillings—say, five shillings. Otherwise, I shall have nothing to eat until Monday, when Mr. Carstone returns.’

‘Nothing to eat? Nothing at all to eat?’ Beggars in the street often make the same confession, but somehow their words fail to carry conviction. Mr. Langhorne, however, did carry conviction.

The old man shook his head. ‘I had some food yesterday at this time. Since then I have had nothing. There was neither tea nor bread in my rooms for breakfast. When the clock struck six, my dinner hour, I thought I would walk along the street and look at the things to eat which are placed in

the shop windows. That relieves a little. But to-morrow will be a bad time—a very bad time. I shall lie in bed. Oh! I have gone through it before. Sometimes’—he dropped his voice—‘I have been sore tempted to take something—— No—no; don’t think I have given way. No—no. Why—I should be—disbarred. Not yet—not yet.’

Elsie opened her purse. It contained two sovereigns and a shilling or two. ‘Take all,’ she said eagerly. ‘Take all the gold, and leave me the silver. Take it instantly.’ She stamped her foot.

He hesitated. ‘All?’ he asked. ‘All? Can you spare it? I can never repay’——

‘Take it!’ she said again, imperiously.

He obeyed: he took the gold out of the purse with trembling fingers. Then he raised his rickety old hat—was that a tear that stole into his eyes, or the rheum of old age?—and slowly walked down the stairs, holding by the banisters. He was weak, poor wretch!

with hunger. But it was his dinner hour, and he was going to have his dinner.

Elsie sat down again.

It was half-past six—she had been waiting for three hours—when other footsteps entered the house. Elsie sprang to her feet: she turned pale: her heart stood still; for now she realised that if this step was truly that of the man she expected, she was about to confront a person certainly of the deepest criminality, and possibly capable of villainy in any other direction. The steps mounted the stairs. I really think that the bravest persons in the world are those who before the event look forward to it with the utmost apprehension. They know, you see, what the dangers are. Elsie was going to face a great danger. She was going to find out, alone and unaided, who this man was, and why and how he worked these deeds of darkness.

The footsteps mounted higher: from the door to the top of the stairs it took but a single minute, yet to Elsie it seemed half an

hour, so rapid were her thoughts. Then the man mounted the last flight of steps. Heavens ! Elsie was fain to cry out for sheer amazement. She cried out : she caught at the banisters. For, before her, taking the key of Mr. Edmund Gray's Chambers from his waistcoat pocket, was none other than Mr. Dering himself !

Yes. An elderly man, of truly benevolent aspect, his coat open flying all abroad, his face soft, gracious, smiling, and full of sunshine, his hat just the least bit pushed back, his left hand in his pocket. Elsie thought again of her portrait at home, in which she had transformed her guardian—and here he was in the flesh—transformed according to her portrait.

She stared at him with an amazement that bereft her of speech and of motion. She could only stare. Even if her mother's voice were suddenly to call out to her that it is rude for little girls to stare, she could not choose but stare. For Mr. Dering looked at her with that kind of surprise in his eyes which means, 'What have we here to do with beautiful

young ladies?’ There was not the least sign of any knowledge of her. He looked at her as one suffers the eyes to rest for a moment without interest upon a stranger and a casual passenger in the street.

He opened his outer door, and was about to walk in, when she recovered some presence of mind—not much. She stepped forward. ‘Can you tell me, please, how I could find Mr. Edmund Gray?’

‘Certainly,’ he smiled—‘nothing easier. I am Edmund Gray.’

‘You!—you—Edmund Gray? Oh! No—no. You cannot be Edmund Gray—you yourself!’ All her beautiful theory of hypnotic influence vanished. No mesmerism or magnetic influence at all. ‘You yourself?’ she repeated, ‘you—Edmund Gray?’

‘Assuredly. Why not? Why should a man not be himself?’

‘Oh! I don’t understand. The world is going upside down. I took you—took you for another person.’

He laughed gently. 'Truly, I am none other than Edmund Gray—always Edmund Gray. My first name I can never change if I wished, because it is my baptismal name. The latter I do not wish to change, because it is my name ancestral.'

'I asked because—because—I fancied a resemblance to another person. Were you ever told that you are much like a certain other person?'

'No ; I think not. Resemblances, however, are extremely superficial. No two living creatures are alike. We are alone, each living out his life in the great Cosmos, quite alone—unlike any other living creature. However, I am Edmund Gray, young lady. It isn't often that I receive a visit from a young lady in these Chambers. If you have no other doubt upon that point, will you let me ask you, once more, how I can help you? And will you come in and sit down?'

'Oh ! it is wonderful,' she cried—'wonderful ! most wonderful !' Again she controlled

herself. 'Are you,' she asked again, 'the same Mr. Edmund Gray who wrote the letter to the *Times* the other day?'

'Certainly. There is no other person, I believe, of the name in this Inn. Have you read that letter?'

'Yes—oh, yes.'

'And you have come here to talk to me about that letter?'

'Yes—yes.' She caught at the hint. 'That is why I came—to talk about that letter. I came in the hope of finding the author of that letter at home.'

He threw open the door of his sitting-room.

'Will you step in? We can talk quite quietly here. The Inn at this hour on Saturday is almost deserted.' He closed the outer door and followed his visitor into the sitting-room. 'This,' he went on, 'is the quietest place in the whole of London. We have not, in this Square, the stately elms of the old garden, but still we have our little advantages

—spacious rooms—quiet always in the evening and on Sundays. A few rackety young men, perhaps ; but for one who reads and meditates, no better place in London.—Now, young lady, take the easy-chair and sit down. We will talk. There are very few people who talk to me about my theories. That is because I am old, so that I have lost my friends, and because my views are in advance of the world. No man is so lonely as the man born before his time. He is the prophet, you know, who must be stoned because he prophesies things unintelligible and therefore uncomfortable—even terrifying. I shall be very glad to talk a little with you.—Now, allow me first to open these letters.’

Elsie sat down and looked about her. She was in a large low wainscoted room, with two windows looking upon the Square. The room was quite plainly but quite well furnished. There was a good-sized study table with drawers : a small table between the windows : a few chairs, a couch and an easy-chair ; and

a large bookcase filled with books—books on Socialism, George had told her. A door opened upon a smaller room: there was probably a bedroom at the back. A plain carpet covered the floor. Above the high old-fashioned mantel were two or three portraits of Socialist leaders. The room, if everything had not been covered with dust, would have been coldly neat: the chairs were all in their places: the window-blinds were half-way down as the laundress thought was proper—millions of Londoners always keep their blinds half-way down—a subject which must some day be investigated by the Folklore Society: the curtains were neatly looped: it wanted only a Bible on a table at a window to make it the Front Parlour of a Dalston Villa. There were no flowers, no ornaments of any kind.

Mr. Edmund Gray opened half-a-dozen letters lying on his table and glanced at them. There were a great many more waiting to be opened.

‘All are from people who have read my

letter,' he said. 'They share with me in the new Faith of a new Humanity. Happy is the man who strikes the note of leading at the right moment. Happy he who lights the lamp just when the darkness is beginning to be felt.—Yes, young lady, you are not the only one who has been drawn towards the doctrines of that letter. But I have no time to write to all of them. A letter makes one convert—a paragraph may make a thousand.'

Elsie rose from her chair. She had decided on her line. You have heard that her voice was curiously soft and winning—a voice that charms—a voice which would soothe a wild creature, and fill a young man's heart with whatever passion she chose to awaken. She had, besides, those soft eyes which make men surrender their secrets, part with their power and their strength. Did she know that she possessed all this power?—the girl who had no experience save of one man's love, and that the most natural, easy, and unromantic love in the world, when two who are brought up

side by side and see each other every day, presently catch each other by the hand and walk for the future hand in hand without a word. Yet Delilah herself, the experienced, the crafty, the trained and taught—could not—did not—act more cleverly and craftily than this artless damsel. To be sure, she possessed great advantages over Delilah—by some esteemed attractive—in the matter of personal charm.

‘Oh!’ she murmured softly, ‘it is a shame that you should be expected to waste your valuable time in writing letters to these people. You must not do it. Your time is wanted for the world, not for individuals.’

‘It is,’ he replied—‘it is. You have said it.’

‘You are a Master—a Leader—a Prince in Israel—a Preacher—a Prophet.’

‘I am—I am. You have said it. I should not myself have dared to say it. But I am.’

‘No one can doubt it who has read that letter. Be my Master—too—as well as the

Master of—of all these people who write to you.'

'Be your Master?' He blushed like a boy.
'Could I desire anything better?'

'My Father and my Master,' she added with a little change of colour. Girls take fright very easily, and perhaps this old gentleman might interpret the invitation—well—into something other than was meant.

'Yes—yes.' He held out his hand. She took it in her own—both her own soft hands, and bowed her head—her comely head—over it.

'I came to-day thinking only'—Oh, Delilah!—'to thank you for your great and generous and noble words, which have put fresh heart into me. And now that I have thanked you, I am emboldened to ask a favour'——

'Anything, anything.'

'You will be my Master—you will teach me. Let me, in return, relieve you of this work.' She laid her hand on the pile of

letters. ‘Let me answer them for you. Let me be your Private Secretary. I have nothing to do. Let me work for you.’ She looked into his face with the sweetest eyes and the most winning smile, and her voice warmed the old man’s ear like soft music. Ah, Circe!—‘Now that I have seen you—let me be your disciple, your most humble disciple, and’—Ah, Siren!—‘let me be more, Edmund Gray—I cannot say Mr. Gray—let me be more, Edmund Gray.’ She laid her hand, her soft-gloved, dainty, delicate hand, upon his, and it produced the effect of an electric battery gently handled. ‘Let me be your Secretary.’

It was ten o’clock before Elsie reached home that evening, and she refused to tell them, even her own brother and her lover, where she had been or how she had spent her evening.

CHAPTER XXII

MASTER AND DISCIPLE

It was Sunday afternoon in Gray's Inn. The new Disciple sat at the feet of the Master, her Gamaliel: one does not know exactly the attitude adopted by a young Rabbi of old, but in this case the disciple sat in a low chair, her hands folded in her lap, curiously and earnestly watching the Master as he walked up and down the room preaching and teaching.

'Master,' she asked, 'have you always preached and held these doctrines?'

'Not always. There was a time when I dwelt in darkness—like the rest of the world.'

'How did you learn these things? By reading books?'

'No. I discovered them. I worked them

out for myself by logic, by reason, and by observation. Everything good and true must be discovered by a man for himself.'

'What did you believe in that old time? Was it, with the rest of the world, the sacredness of Property?'

'Perhaps.' He stood in front of her, laying his right forefinger in his left forefinger and inclining his head. 'My dear young scholar, one who believes as I believe, not with half a heart, but wholly, and without reserve, willingly forgets the time when he was as yet groping blindly in darkness or walking in artificial light. He wishes to forget that time. There is no profit in remembering that time. I have so far drilled and trained myself not to remember that time, that I have in fact clean forgotten it. I do not remember what I thought or what I said, or with whom I associated in that time. It is a most blessed forgetfulness. I daresay I could recover the memory of it if I wished, but the effort would be painful. Spare me. The recovery of that

Part would be humiliating. Spare me, scholar. Yet, if you wish—if you command'——

'Oh, no, no! Forgive me.' Elsie touched his hand. He took hers and held it. Was it with a little joy or a little fear that the girl observed the power she already had over him? 'I would not cause you pain. Besides—what does it matter?'

'You know, my child, when the monk assumes the tonsure and the triple cord, he leaves behind him, outside the cell, all the things of the world—ambition, love, luxury, the pride of the eye—all—all. He forgets everything. He casts away everything. He abandons everything—for meditation and prayer. The monk,' added the Sage, 'is a foolish person, because his meditation advances not the world a whit. I am like the monk, save that I think for the world instead of myself. And so, spending days and nights in meditation, I know not what went before—nor do I care. It is a second birth when the new faith takes you and holds you together,

so that you care for nothing else. Oh, child!—upon you also this shall come—this obsession—this possession—so that your spirit shall know of no time but that spent in the service of the Cause. Nay, I go so far that I forget from day to day what passed, except when I was actively engaged for the Cause. Yesterday I was here in the afternoon. You came. We talked. You offered yourself as my disciple. I remember every word you said. Could I ever forget a disciple so trustful and so humble? But—before you came. Where was I? Doubtless here—meditating. But I know not. Then there are things which one must do to live—breakfast, dinner—of these I remember nothing. Why should I? It is a great gift and reward to me that I should not remember unnecessary things—low and common things. Why should I try to do so?’

‘No—no,’ murmured the catechumen, carried away by his earnestness. ‘Best forget them. Best live altogether in and for the Cause.’ Yet—she wondered—how was she to

bring things home to him unless he could be made to remember? He was mad one hour and sane the next. How should she bridge the gulf and make the mad man cross over to *the other side*?

The Master took her hand in his and held it paternally. 'We needed such a disciple as you,' he went on, slightly bending his head over her. 'Among my followers there is earnestness without understanding. They believe in the good time, but they are impatient. They want revolution, which is terrific and destroys. I want conviction. There are times when a great idea flies abroad like the flame through the stubble. But men's minds must first be so prepared that they are ready for it. The world is not yet ready for my idea, and I am old, and may die too soon to see the sudden rise of the mighty flood, when that doctrine shall suddenly cease in all mankind. We need disciples. Above all, we need women. Why do women, I wonder, throw themselves away in imitating man, when there

are a thousand things that they can do better than any man? I want women—young, beautiful, faithful. I can find work for hundreds of women. Hypatia would be worth to me—to us—far more than he of the Golden Mouth. Child—your sweet voice, your sweet face, your sweet eyes—I want them. I will take them and use them—expend them—for the great Cause. It may be that you will be called upon to become the first martyr of the Cause. Hypatia was murdered by a raging mob. You will have against you a mob worse than any of Alexandria. You will have a mob composed of all those who are rich, and all who want to be rich, and all the servile crews at their command. Happy girl! You will be torn to pieces for the cause of humanity. Happy girl! I see the roaring, shrieking mob. I see your slender figure on the steps—what steps? Where? I hear your voice, clear and high. You are preaching to them; they close in round you: you disappear—they have dragged

you down : they trample the life out of you. You are dead—dead—dead—and a name for ever. And the Cause has had its martyr.'

It was strange. She who had offered herself as a disciple with deception in her heart, thinking only to watch and wait and spy until she could see her way plain before her, who knew that she was listening to the voice and the dreams of a madman. Yet she was carried away : he made her see the mob : she saw herself dragged down and trampled under their heels. She shuddered, yet she was exultant : her eyes glowed with a new light : she murmured : ' Yes—yes. Do with me what you please. I am your disciple, and I will be your martyr, if you please.'

Great and wonderful is the power of Enthusiasm. You see, it matters nothing—nothing in the world—what a man has to preach and teach—whether he advocates Obi, or telepathy, or rapping, or spirits who hide teacups in coat pockets—it matters nothing that there is neither common sense nor

evidence, nor common reason to back him : if he only possess the magnetic power, he will create a following : he will have disciples who will follow him to the death. What is it—this power ? It makes the orator, the poet, the painter, the novelist, the dramatist : it makes the leader of men : it made the first King, the first Priest, the first Conqueror.

‘Come,’ said Mr. Edmund Gray ; ‘the time passes. I must take you to my Place.’

They walked out together, Master and Scholar. The man who was mad walked carelessly and buoyantly, his coat flying open, one hand in his pocket, the other brandishing his walking-stick, his head thrown back, his face full of light, and, though his words were sometimes strong, always full of kindness. Now the sane man, the man of Lincoln’s Inn, wore his coat tightly buttoned, walked with a firm precise step, looked straight before him, and showed the face of one wholly occupied with his own thoughts. There was a man who was mad and a man who was sane : and

certainly the madman was the more interesting of the two.

‘This place,’ said the Master, meaning Gray’s Inn, ‘is entirely filled with those who live by and for the defence of Property. They absorb and devour a vast portion of it while they defend it. No one, you see, defends it unless he is paid for it. Your country, your family, your honour—you will defend for nothing; but not another man’s Property—no. For that you must be paid. Every year it becomes more necessary to defend Property; every year the hordes of mercenaries increase. Here they are lawyers and lawyers’ clerks—a vast multitude. Outside there are agents, brokers, insurers, financiers—I know not what—all defending Property. They produce nothing, these armies: they take their toll: they devour a part of what other people have produced before they hand on the residue to the man who says it is his Property.’

‘Oh!’—but Elsie did not say this aloud—‘if these words could only be heard in

Lincoln's Inn! If they could be repeated to a certain lawyer.' From time to time she looked at him curiously. How if he should suddenly return to his senses? What would he think? How should she explain? 'Mr. Dering, you have been off your head. You have been talking the most blasphemous things about Property. You would never believe that even in madness you could say such things.' No; he never would believe it—never. He could not believe it. What if his brother, Sir Samuel, were to hear those words? Meantime, the Apostle walked along unconscious, filled with his great Mission. Oh, heavens! that Mr. Dering—Mr. Dering—should believe he had a Mission!

The Master stopped a passing tramcar. 'Let us climb up to the roof,' he said. 'There we can talk and breathe and look about us, and sometimes we can listen.'

On the seat in front of them sat two young men, almost boys, talking together eagerly. Mr. Edmund Gray leaned forward and listened shamelessly. 'They are two young

atheists,' he said. 'They are cursing religion. There is to be a discussion this evening at Battle Arches between a Christian and an Atheist, and they are going to assist. They should be occupied with the question of the day; they cannot, because they, too, are paid defenders of Property. They are lawyers' clerks. They are poor and they are slaves: all their lives they will be slaves and they will be poor. Instead of fighting against slavery and poverty, which they know and feel, they fight against the Unknown and the Unintelligible. Pity! Pity!'

They passed two great Railway Termini, covering an immense area with immense buildings.

'Now,' said the Sage, 'there are millions of Property invested in railways. Whenever the railway servants please, they can destroy all that Property at a stroke. Perhaps you will live to see this done.'

'But,' said Elsie timidly, 'we must have things carried up and down the country.'

'Certainly. We shall go carrying things

up and down the country, but not in the interests of Property.'

The tram ran past the stations and under broad railway arches, called Battle Arches—where the two young atheists got down, eager for the fray, always renewed every Sunday afternoon, with the display of much intellectual skill and much ignorance. It is a duel from which both combatants retire, breathed and flushed, proud of having displayed so much smartness, both claiming the victory, surrounded by admiring followers, and neither of them killed, neither of them hurt, neither of them a bit the worse, and both ready to begin again the following Sunday with exactly the same attack and exactly the same defence. There are some institutions—Christianity, the Church of England, the House of Lords, for instance—which invite and receive perpetual attacks, from which they emerge without the least hurt, so far as one can perceive. If they were all abolished to-morrow, what would the spouters do?

The car stopped again, and two girls mounted—two work-girls of the better sort—not, that is to say, the sort which wears an ulster and a large hat with a flaming feather in it : working-girls dressed quietly and neatly. They ought to have been cheerful and even gay, for they were both young, both good-looking, both nicely dressed, and it was Sunday afternoon, warm and sunny. Yet they were not cheerful at all. One of them was in a rage royal, and the other, her friend, was in a rage sympathetic—quite a real rage. They were talking loudly on the kerb while they waited for the tram : they carried on their conversation as they climbed the stair : they continued it while they chose a seat, and before they sat down, without the least regard to those who sat near them, whether they overheard or wished not to hear—or anything. They were wholly occupied with themselves and their rage and their narrative. They neither saw nor heeded any one else—which is the way that the angry woman has.

‘So I told her—I up and told her, I did. “Yes,” I sez, “you and your fifteen hours a day and overtime,” I sez—“and your fines—so as to rob the poor girls of their money, and your stinkin’ little room, as isn’t fit for two, let alone a dozen—and your flarin’ gas,” I sez, “to choke us and poison us—and your dinners—yah! your dinners,” I sez—“fit for pigs; and your beast of a husband comin’ round with his looks and his leers”—“You let my husband alone,” she sez—“His looks and his leers,” I sez. “Some day the girls ’ll take him out and drownd him head first, in the gutter,” I sez. “And a good job too!”’

‘You didn’t say all that, Liz?’ asked the other, admiringly. ‘My! What’s she say to hat? “Her beast of a husband”? And “his looks and his leers”? Did you really, Liz, and her that jealous?’

‘I did. Oh! I let her have it. For once, she did have it. Then I took my money and I went off.—Never mind what she called me; that don’t matter. She got the truth for once.’

‘What do you make of this, disciple?’ asked the Master.

‘It seems a quarrel between the girl and her employer.’

‘These are the makers of Property. They are not the soldiers who defend it. They are those who create it. The girls are employed by the sweater, who stands on the lowest rung of the ladder of Property, and steals the things as fast as they are made.’

‘One of them has been turned out. What will she do? Will she find another place?’

‘I don’t know. What becomes of the young? It is a difficult question. No one knows. Some say this and some say that. We know what becomes of the old when they are turned out. They die. But as for the young, I know not. You are young, and you are a woman. Go among the young women who have been turned out and find for yourself—for the world—what does become of them.’

They passed an immense churchyard, with

an ancient church standing in the midst—the churchyard now cleared of its headstones and converted into a beautiful garden, after the modern fashion, in which we have abandoned the pretence of remembering the dead, and plant flowers and turf above their graves for the solace of the living. Why not? Let the nameless dead be remembered by the nameless dead. Their virtues, if they had any, may live after them in their descendants.

‘See,’ said Mr. Edmund Gray, moralising. ‘Here they lie, those who were soldiers of Property and those who were slaves of Property. They are mostly the poor of their parish who lie in that garden. No headstones mark their grave. They were born: they toiled for others to enjoy: and they died. Is this the life that men should most desire?’

‘Nay,’ said the disciple. ‘But there must be the strong and weak—clever and dull: there must be inequalities.’

‘Yes, inequalities of gifts. One man is stronger, one is sharper, one is cleverer than

another. Formerly, those gifts were used to make their possessor richer and more powerful. The strong man got followers and made slaves. The clever man cheated the dull man out of his land and his liberty. Henceforth, these gifts will be used for the general good. Patience! You shall understand all in good time.'

He stopped the tram and they descended.

Lying east of the Hampstead Road and Camden High Street, and bounded on that side by the canal—the great space occupied by the Midland and Great Northern Goods Depôt, by gas-works, wharfs, and railway arches—there is a network of streets very little known to any but the parish clergy. No part of London is less interesting than this district. It used to be called Somers Town, but I think that the old name has almost died out. It is about a hundred years old, regarded as a settlement: it possesses three churches at least, two workhouses, one almshouse, and three burial-grounds turned into gardens. It is also

cheered by the presence of a coal dépôt. Many small industries are carried on in this quarter : there are many lodging-houses : the streets are rather grimy, the houses are rather shabby, the people are rather slipshod. They are not criminals : they are, in a way, respectable—that is to say, tolerably respectable. It is not a picturesque suburb : dulness reigns : it is a dull, a dull, a dismally dull quarter. There are children, but they lack mirth : and young girls, but they lack the spring of youth : one would say that there was a low standard in everything, even in the brightness of dress : the place looks better in winter than in summer. To-day, the bright sunshine only made the shabbiness of the streets more shabby.

‘Is your place here?’ asked Elsie.

‘Yes ; it is here.—You wonder why I came here. Because the people here are not all working-people. Some of them are small employers—those of whom I spoke—who stand on the lowest rung of the ladder and

steal the things as fast as they are made, and take toll, and hoard up savings. The working-man is generous and open to others, compared with these people. I planted my place down in the midst of them. But you shall see—you shall see.'

It was like a dream. Elsie walked beside her conductor. Yesterday she made the acquaintance of this man for the first time; she had never seen him before except in his sane condition; he was a madman—a real dangerous madman—stark staring mad; he was taking her she knew not where—to some place among strange people: she walked beside him without the least fear. She who would have fled before the most harmless lunatic; and she was going with him as his disciple.

'George,' she said afterwards, 'I do not know how it happened. I could not choose but go with him. I could not choose but to become his disciple: he compelled me. I lost my will. I even forgot that he was a madman:

I gave up my reason and all : I followed him, and I believed all that he told me. How did he get that power? Directly I left him, I became myself again. I perceived the mad enthusiast. I saw Mr. Dering caricatured and proclaiming foolishness. But in his presence I was his servant and his slave.'

'Here we are,' he said. 'This is my Place. Let us go in.'

CHAPTER XXIII

THE HALL OF THE NEW FAITH

THE Place, as Mr. Edmund Gray modestly called it, was a meek and unpretending Structure. The word is used advisedly, because no one could call it anything else. Not an Edifice ; not a Building—a Structure. It turned its gabled front to the street, with a door below and a window above. It was of gray brick with a slate roof—a very plain and simple Structure. It might have been a Primitive Methodist Chapel—the Connexion are fond of such neat and unpretending places : or a room belonging to the Salvation Army : or one of those queer lecture halls affected by Secularists and generally called

the Hall of Science. On the doorpost was affixed a small handbill, announcing that every Sunday evening at seven o'clock an address would be pronounced by Edmund Gray, on the subject of 'Property.' On the same bill, below the line of the principal title, were suggestive sub-titles. Thus :

'PROPERTY AND ITS ORIGIN.'

'PROPERTY AND ITS EVILS.'

'PROPERTY AND ITS DANGERS.'

'PROPERTY AND LIBERTY.'

'PROPERTY AND PROGRESS.'

'PROPERTY AND ITS DECAY.'

The Master pointed to the Bill. 'Read it,' he said. 'There you have my mission clearly announced. No mistake about it. A bold pronouncement, which cannot be mistaken. I make war against Property—I am the enemy irreconcilable—the enemy to the death—of Property. I am almost alone against the world, for my followers are a feeble folk and without power. All the interests, all the prejudices, all the powers, all the intellect, of the

whole world are against me. I stand alone. But I fear nothing, because the future is given over to me and to mine—yea—though I do not live to see the day of Victory.’

He opened the door, and Elsie entered. She found herself in a room about sixty feet long by twenty broad, and lofty—a fine and goodly room. It was furnished with a long and narrow table running down the middle, and a few benches. Nothing else. The table was laid with a white cloth, and provided with plates of ham and beef, cold sausages, hard-boiled eggs, cakes, toast, muffins, bread and butter, marmalade, jam, shrimps, water-cresses and teacups. In fact, there was spread out a Tea of generous proportions.

The room was half filled with thirty or forty people, mostly young, though there were some elderly men. Among them Elsie remarked, without surprise, the decayed Barrister of Gray’s Inn. Perhaps he was attracted as much by the loaves as by the sermon. Three-quarters of them were young

men. Elsie noticed that they were young men of a curious type—their faces keen, their eyes hard, their manner aggressive. They belonged to a Church Militant. They longed to be fighting. On the appearance of their preacher they flocked about him, shaking hands and inquiring after his health. At least, therefore, he had the affection of his followers.

‘My friends,’ said the Prophet, ‘I bring you a new Disciple. She comes to us from the very stronghold of Property. Her friends,—yet he had shown no sign of recognition—‘are either those who pillage the producer, or those who rob the possessor on pretence of defending him. She is at present only a recruit. She comes to listen and to learn. She will go home to remember and to meditate. She is a recruit now who will be hereafter a Leader.’

The people received her with curiosity. They were not of the higher classes, to put it mildly, and they had never had a young lady among them before. Two or three girls who

were present—girls from the dressmaker's workrooms—looked at her frock with envy, and at her bonnet and her gloves with a yearning, helpless, heart-sinking admiration. To the young men she seemed a goddess, unapproachable. They stood at a distance: men of the rank above them would have worshipped. These young men only gaped. Such a girl had nothing to do with their lives.

Apparently they had been waiting for the Master, for at the moment a stout woman and a girl appeared bearing trays with teapots and jugs of hot water, which they placed upon the board. Mr. Edmund Gray took the chair. Elsie began to feel like Alice in Wonderland. She came to see a 'Place': she expected to hear a sermon or a lecture; and behold a Tea!

'Sit beside me,' said the Master. 'We begin our evening on Sunday with a simple feast, which I provide. It is a sign of brotherhood. Every Sunday we begin with this renewal of fraternity. Those who break bread together are brothers and sisters. In

the good time to come every meal shall be in common, and every evening meal shall be a Feast. Eat and drink with us, my daughter. So you will understand that you belong to a Brotherhood.'

'Try some shrimps, Miss,' said her neighbour on the right, an elderly man, who was a builder's foreman.

History does not concern itself with what Elsie took. She found the meal very much to the purpose after a long afternoon of talk, argument, and emotion. She was young and she was hungry. The tea was good: the things to eat were good: the cake and toast were admirable. Elsie ate and drank and wondered what was coming next.

After a little, she began to look round her and to watch the company. There were now, she counted, forty-five of them—forty-five disciples of Mr. Edmund Gray. What had he to teach them? The destruction of Property. Out of the four millions of London, forty-five were found who wanted to destroy Property—

only forty-five. But perhaps all who advocated that step were not present. Her ancient prejudices whispered that this was a reassuring fact, considering that the Preacher had preached his doctrine for nine long years. Only forty-five. Next to her the foreman began to talk to her of Fourier and Owen and a dozen half-forgotten leaders in the old experiments. He had been a Chartist in the Forties : he was a Socialist in these, the Nineties : but he confessed that before any real reform was attempted, Property must first be destroyed.

‘It’s the selfishness,’ he whispered earnestly, ‘that’s got to be torn out by the roots. Take that away, and there’s a chance for the world. It never can be taken away till a man finds that he can’t work no longer for himself, and that he must work for all, whether he likes it or lumps it. Don’t give him the choice nor the chance, I say. Take away Property, and there’s neither choice nor chance left. You hear Mr. Gray upon that. Oh, he’s

powerful! What do they say? Naked we came into the world. Naked we enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. There's a wonderful lot of fine things hangin' to that. You must wait till you hear Mr. Gray upon that theme.—Kingdom of Heaven! To hear the parsons talk, it's away above the clouds. Not so. It's here—close beside us—on this earth. All we've got to do is to put out our hands and reach it.'

'You may put out your hands as much as you like,' said one of the younger men; 'but you won't reach it, all the same. Property stands between.'

'At our place,' said a girl sitting opposite—a girl of intelligent face, pale and thin,—'we work from eight till eight, and sometimes longer, for twelve shillings a week. I know what things cost and what they sell for. I could produce enough to keep me—ah! a good deal better than I live now—if I could sell what I made myself—for four hours' work a day. So I work eight hours a day, not

counting the dinner hour, just to keep the boss and to make Property for him. My Property it is—well—I know—in here, we say, *our* Property: outside we say, *my* Property. Where's your Kingdom of Heaven, then, if you reach out your hand ever so far, so long as I've got to work to make somebody else rich? Let's destroy Property, and then we shall see.'

A desire—a foolish concealed desire, born of prejudice, seized Elsie to argue. For she perceived in the girl's reasoning certain confusions and intricacies. But she had the courage to suppress the inclination: she refrained. She was a disciple. She must listen.

'I am a slave, like all the rest of us,' another young man remarked cheerfully. 'My Master owns me. He can sell me if he likes, only he calls it by another name; he can't take a whip and lash me, though he'd like to, because, if he did, I'd break every bone in his body for him, but he can cut down the work and the money. I do editing and

reporting for a local paper. Thirty shillings a week. The proprietor makes ten pounds a week out of it. And I'm not allowed to tell the truth for fear of advertisers.' He added a few words not commonly heard in a place that looks like a chapel on a Sunday evening.

Elsie observed that their faces showed two variations of expression—only two. The majority of the company had the eyes of the dreamer, the theorist, the enthusiast. They are soft eyes, and in repose are heavy, and they look through stone walls into space, far away—space where their dreams are realised and men and women live according to their theories. In moments of enthusiasm and passion they become flaming fires. These eyes belonged to most of those present. The rest—the minority—were those who are angry and restless and eager for the practical application of the doctrine. These want revolution: they are impatient: they feel for themselves the injustices and oppressions which enthu-

siasts feel for others : these are always resentful : the others are always hopeful : these want to convert the world at once with bludgeon and with gun : the others are certain that before long the world will be converted by reason. The one despairs of anything but force : the other will have no force : the one hates his enemy : he would kill him if he could : he has no words too bad for him : the enthusiast, on the other hand, regards his enemy with pity, and would at any moment welcome him, forgive him, and—well—invite him to a Fraternal Tea if he would only desert his ranks and come over. And these are the two divisions in every party, and such is the nature of man that there must always be these two divisions.

The Fraternal Tea finished, the company cleared the tables, everybody lending a hand, perhaps as another sign or pledge of fraternity. It was then nearly seven o'clock, the hour appointed for the address. The door was thrown wide open for the admission of the

world ; but there was no sign that the world took the least interest in the subject of Property. No one came at all. Elsie learned afterwards that the world outside the Hall had long since grown tired of the subject on which Mr. Gray had been preaching for nine years. Those who came to the Tea were the inner circle of believers or disciples, a small but faithful company, to whose members there was rarely any addition.

At seven Mr. Edmund Gray rose to commence his address, standing at the head of the table, so that it was like an after-dinner speech. Outside, the sun was hot and bright and the air clear. Within the Hall, there were the mingled odours and steams of long-protracted and hearty Fraternal Tea : the air was heavy and the room dark. When the Master began to speak, a young man—one of the ardent and wrathful kind—drew out a note-book and took everything down : all listened with respect, some with rapt interest. Some nodded—some groaned—some said

‘Hear’ softly—to encourage the preacher and to show their adhesion to principle.

Elsie sat at the right hand of the speaker. His discourses moved her much less in this public place than in his chambers. The persuasive voice was there, but it did not persuade her—moreover, she could not meet his eyes. Their magnetism failed to touch her. So much the better, because she could listen with cold judgment and watch the people.

‘My friends,’ he began, ‘my brothers and my sisters—we are all long since agreed that the root of all evil, the first form of disease, the first fatal step that was leading to so many other mischiefs, was the beginning of Property. We have proved that so often—we are all so entirely agreed upon this vital principle, that we seldom, and only on rare occasions, find it necessary to do more than assume its truth. That occasion, however, is the present, when we have among us one who comes as a stranger, yet a disciple: one who has a mind open to the influence of reason: one who is

anxious to clear herself of the prejudices and absurdities in which she has been from infancy brought up. Let us, therefore, briefly, for her instruction and for the strengthening of our own faith, point out some of the arguments which support this position. It is to us an axiom. To the world it still requires proof. And the world refuses to accept the proof, because it is given over to the Chase of the Abominable Thing.'

He proceeded to parade the reasons which made his School regard Property as the root of all evil. The line which he pursued was not new : many men have pointed out before Mr. Edmund Gray the selfishness of mankind as illustrated by the universal game of Grab : others, with equal force, have shown that the protection of Things causes an immense expenditure and a great shrinkage in Things : others have shown that it is the continual efforts of men to get without working the Things for which others have worked, that fill our jails and keep up an army of police.

‘We start with a false principle,’ the Master went on, ‘which has ruined the world and still keeps it down. If there are to be rich men, they must become rich at the expense of the rest: they must be few and the poor must be many. Therefore, the protection of Property is the robbery of the poor by law. We all know that: in this place we have agreed, so far, a thousand times: the rich can only become rich by robbing the poor: they rob their land: they rob their work: they rob their whole lives—and they are permitted and encouraged by the Law. Shall we, then, change the Law? No: it would be a work too vast. Shall we change the minds of men? Not by reason: it is impossible by any argument so long as by law and custom they can still rob the producer of his work. The only way is to destroy all Property. When men can no longer by any kind of thought get richer than their neighbours, then they will cease to think for themselves, and think for the whole community. You will say—some

one may object—that some are not the same in strength of mind or of body: there will be many, then, who will refuse to work at all, and become burdens on the community. We have thought of that objection. At first, there would be many such; but not for long. Because we should kill them. Yes, my friends,’ he added with a smile of the sweetest benevolence. ‘For the good of the community it will be necessary, without any sentimental considerations, to kill all those who refuse to work, all those who shirk their work, all those who persistently do scamped and bad work. They must die. So the commonwealth shall contain none but those who are vigorous, loyal, and true. For the rest—Death—if it means the death of a million who were once rich—Death is the only escape from the difficulty which is so often objected.

‘It has been asked again how we differ from the Socialists. In this. We would begin with no theories, no constitution, no code. Only let every man give all his

strength, all his heart, all his mind, to the good of the commonwealth, without the least power of enriching himself, saving money—of course there would be no money—without the chance of getting better food and better clothes than the rest—and we may safely leave the world to take care of itself. Why—my brothers—why—my sisters—should we poor purblind creatures, unable to comprehend more than a glimpse of that glorious future which awaits the world when Property shall be destroyed—why—I say—should we dare to lay down schemes and invent systems for that glorified humanity? Let us leave them to themselves. They will be as far above us, my brothers, as we are already above the holders and the defenders of Property.'

Elsie looked at the little gathering—five-and-forty—with a little smile. They were then already far above the holders and the defenders of Property, and again she thought, 'What if these words were heard in Lincoln's Inn?'

‘How, then, can Property be destroyed?’

At this practical question every one sat upright, coughed, and looked interested. Their Preacher had often enough declaimed upon the evils of Property. He seldom spoke of a practical way. Perhaps the time had come.

‘There are, my friends, several ways. They are already beginning to be understood and to be worked. The Irish and the politicians who wanted the Irish vote have shown the world how to destroy property in land. Believe me, that example will be followed. It was an evil day for the holders of Property when the Government interfered between the landlord and his tenant. That example will bear fruit elsewhere. We shall see everywhere the owners of the land turned out and their places taken by those who work the land. The next step is from land to houses. Why not with houses as with land? Since a beginning has been made, it must be carried on. But there is other property besides lands

and houses. There are companies with shares, railways, and so forth. We have only begun to see what united labour can effect—since union of labour is, in fact, not yet begun. When it is fairly started, it will pay small respect to shareholders and to dividends. When wages are paid, there will be perhaps no dividend left at all. In a single year—nay, a single week—the whole capital invested in all the companies will lose its value: it will be so much waste-paper. My friends, we need not stir hand or foot to bring about this end: it will be done for us by the working-man, and by those who follow the example of Ireland. They will do it for their own selfish ends first—but—Property once destroyed, we shall never again allow it to be created.

‘Oh!’—he warmed with his subject, his voice grew more musical, his face glowed—‘I see a splendid—a noble sight. I see the great houses in the country fallen to ruin and decay: their contents are stored in museums;

the great palaces of the towns are pulled down: the towns themselves are decayed and shrunk: there is no Property: there is no one working for himself: the man of science works his laboratory for the community—but he has the honour of his discoveries: the medical man pursues his work with no thought of getting rich: there is plenty to go the round of everything—oh! plenty of the best. We can have what we like, do what we like, dress as we like, teach what we please—provided we work for the State. If we refuse—Death! If we give bad work—Death! It is the only Law. We shall have no lawyers—no power—no magistrates. Oh! great and glorious time—you shall see it, you who are young—yes, you shall see it—while I—I—I—who have dreamed of the time so long—I shall lie low in the grave. What matter—so the time come and so the world rises free at last to follow out the destiny of a new and glorified humanity!’

He sat down and laid his head upon his

hand, as one in prayer. They remained in silence till he raised his head. Then the young man who had called attention to his slavery spoke.

‘There is perhaps another way,’ he said, ‘which might do the job for us. Suppose the chemists were to find out how to produce food—food of any kind—artificially—just as good and as nourishing as if it was butcher-meat or bread. Suppose it could be produced dirt cheap—most chemists’ things cost nothing. Then no one would need to work: because he’d have his food found for him. If no one would need to work, no one could get rich any more. And if no one wanted to buy anything, nobody could sell. Then riches wouldn’t count, and there you are. Let’s get a chemist to take the thing up.’

The conversation that followed struck out new ideas. Presently it flagged, and one by one the people stole away.

The Master and the Disciple returned in the tram as far as Gray’s Inn.

The Master fell into profound silence a quarter of an hour before the end of the journey. When they got down, Elsie observed first, that he buttoned his coat; next, that he put on gloves; thirdly, that he pulled his hat forwards: and lastly, that he ignored her presence. He drew himself erect, and walked away with firm and precise step in the direction of Bedford Row, which is on the other side of Gray's Inn. He was once more Mr. Edward Dering.

‘I wonder,’ said Elsie, ‘how much, to-morrow, he will recollect?’

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME

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